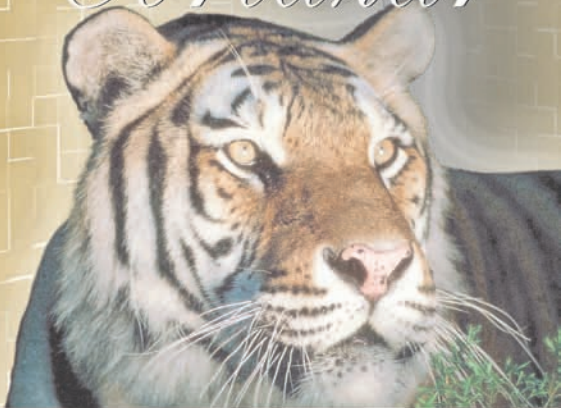


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**BLOOM'S**  
M A J O R  
**SHORT**  
**STORY**  
W R I T E R S

*Julio*  
*Cortázar*



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**WRITERS**

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Cortázar*

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 **CHELSEA HOUSE**  
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EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY HAROLD BLOOM

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## USER'S GUIDE

This volume is designed to present biographical, critical, and bibliographical information on the author and the author's best-known or most important short stories. Following Harold Bloom's editor's note and introduction is a concise biography of the author that discusses major life events and important literary accomplishments. A plot summary of each story follows, tracing significant themes, patterns, and motifs in the work. An annotated list of characters supplies brief information on the main characters in each story. As with any study guide, it is recommended that the reader read the story beforehand, and have a copy of the story being discussed available for quick reference.

A selection of critical extracts, derived from previously published material, follows each character list. In most cases, these extracts represent the best analysis available from a number of leading critics. Because these extracts are derived from previously published material, they will include the original notations and references when available. Each extract is cited, and readers are encouraged to check the original publication as they continue their research. A bibliography of the author's writings, a list of additional books and articles on the author and their work, and an index of themes and ideas conclude the volume.



## ABOUT THE EDITOR

**Harold Bloom** is Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University and Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Professor of English at the New York University Graduate School. He is the author of over 20 books, and the editor of more than 30 anthologies of literary criticism.

Professor Bloom's works include *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959), *The Visionary Company* (1961), *Blake's Apocalypse* (1963), *Yeats* (1970), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), *Agon: Toward a Theory of Revisionism* (1982), *The American Religion* (1992), *The Western Canon* (1994), and *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (1996). *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) sets forth Professor Bloom's provocative theory of the literary relationships between the great writers and their predecessors. His most recent books include *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, a 1998 National Book Award finalist, *How to Read and Why* (2000), and *Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages* (2001) which was published in 2000, *Genius: A Mosaic of 100 Exemplary Creative Minds* (2002), and *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (2003).

Professor Bloom earned his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1955 and has served on the Yale faculty since then. He is a 1985 MacArthur Foundation Award recipient and served as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University in 1987–88. In 1999 he was awarded the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Criticism. Professor Bloom is the editor of several other Chelsea House series in literary criticism, including BLOOM'S MAJOR SHORT STORY WRITERS, BLOOM'S MAJOR NOVELISTS, BLOOM'S MAJOR DRAMATISTS, BLOOM'S MODERN CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS, BLOOM'S MODERN CRITICAL VIEWS, and BLOOM'S BIOCRITIQUES.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

My Introduction is an appreciation of the inventive fantasia of the Cortázar story, "Bestiary."

As twenty-two Critical Views are excerpted in this volume, I shall highlight only those I myself find most useful, while expressing gratitude for all insights reprinted here.

Cortázar, like the major French poets Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry, was strongly influenced by Poe, who evidently is most effective with those who read English, but do not fully control its nuances. The mark of Poe is prevalent in all of Cortázar's work.

Though Argentine by nationality, Cortázar was born in Brussels and lived the second half of his life in Paris, where he was to die in 1983, just short of seventy. His literary culture was eclectic, with Borges and Poe his mingled precursors, and much of French literature flavoring the mix.

The weird tale, "Axolotl," associates these quasi-salamanders with Aztecs, and transforms the narrator into the state of these creatures. Pamela J. McNab traces the narrator's condition back to Poe's obsession of being buried alive, though she astutely notes that Cortázar, a true fantasist, transcends Poe.

"Bestiary," a masterpiece of the short story genre, is meditated upon in my Introduction, where I am indebted to Jaime Alazraki for his Nietzschean insight that cause and effect in Cortázar are only linguistic fictions.

The famous "Blow-Up" was the basis for Antonioni's movie, which is compared to the story by David I. Grossvogel, while Mary Ann Caws ponders the influence of Surrealism, and Seymour Chatman applies narratology. I confess that I could not last through anything by the sublimely slow Antonioni, and have parallel impatiences with Cortázar's story.

I greatly prefer "End of the Game," lucidly analyzed by Ilan Stavans as a rite of passage, and the vivid "The Night Face Up," usefully compared by Ana María Amar Sánchez to the Cuban novelist Carpentier's *The Lost Steps*. I myself would suggest D.H. Lawrence as another analogue, perhaps even source, for Cortázar's murderous fantasy.

## INTRODUCTION

### Harold Bloom

“Bestiary” is a permanent short story not so much because of its fantastic tiger, but through its subtle and nuanced presentation of Isabel’s passion for Rema, a passion that turns murderous and destroys her sadistic uncle, by means of the tiger.

I don’t see any allegory in the tiger, though one cannot say that sometimes a tiger is only a tiger. But “Bestiary” is something of a jest, as well as the account of Isabel’s desire for Rema’s soft touch. The long, stunning final paragraph of the story, rendered here with great skill by Paul Blackburn, haunts me frequently:

The Kid was eating already, the newspaper beside him, there was hardly enough room for Isabel to rest her arm. Luis was the last to come from his room, contented as he always was at noon. They ate, Nino was talking about the snails, the snail eggs in the reeds, the collection itself, the sizes and the colors. He was going to kill them by himself, it hurt Isabel to do it, they’d put them to dry on a zinc sheet. After the coffee came and Luis looked at them with the usual question. Isabel got up first to look for don Roberto, even though don Roberto had already told her before. She made the round of the porch and when she came in again, Rema and Nino had their heads together over the snail box, it was like a family photograph, only Luis looked up at her and she said, “It’s in the Kid’s study,” and stayed watching how the Kid shrugged his shoulders, annoyed, and Rema who touched a snail with a fingertip, so delicately that her finger even seemed part snail. Afterwards, Rema got up to go look for more sugar, and Isabel tailed along behind her babbling until they came back in laughing from a joke they’d shared in the pantry. When Luis said he had no tobacco and ordered Nino to look in his study, Isabel challenged him that she’d find the cigarettes first and they went out together. Nino won, they came back in

running and pushing, they almost bumped into the Kid going to the library to read his newspaper, complaining because he couldn't use his study. Isabel came over to look at the snails, and Luis waiting for her to light his cigarette as always saw that she was lost, studying the snails which were beginning to ooze out slowly and move about, looking at Rema suddenly, but dropping her like a flash, captivated by the snails, so much so that she didn't move at the Kid's first scream, they were all running and she was still standing over the snails as if she did not hear the Kid's new choked cry. Luis beating against the library door, don Roberto coming in with the dogs, the Kid's moans amid the furious barking of the dogs, and Luis saying over and over again, "But it was in his study! She said it was in his own study!," bent over the snails willowy as fingers, like Rema's fingers maybe, or it was Rema's hand on her shoulder, made her raise her head to look at her, to stand looking at her for an eternity, broken by her ferocious sob into Rema's skirt, her unsettled happiness, and Rema running her hand over her hair, quieting her with a soft squeeze of her fingers and a murmuring against her ear, a stuttering as of gratitude, as of an unnamable acquiescence.

The rhetorical effect here partly depends upon *montage*. Isabel scarcely can rest either her arm or her desire for Rema, because of the aggressive presence of the Kid, her threatening uncle. When Isabel and Rema return together from the pantry, have they shared more than a joke? The superb final sentence is an ecstasy of sexual happiness, in which Rema accepts gratefully Isabel's gift of destroying the Kid, and silently assents to the assassination. There is something almost infinitely suggestive of a potential, mutual bliss awaiting Rema and Isabel in Cortázar's final cadences.

## BIOGRAPHY OF

# Julio Cortázar

Julio Florencio Cortázar was born to Argentine ex-patriots in war-torn Brussels as Germans occupied the city in 1914. His father, Julio, headed a commercial delegation attached to the Argentine embassy in Belgium. His mother, María Herminia Scott, spoke to her son primarily in French. Her son's Spanish would always retain the characteristic French pronunciation of "r". Because Argentina was neutral, the Cortázar family was able to seek refuge during the First World War in both Switzerland and Spain. They spent close to two years in Barcelona before being able to return to Argentina in 1918.

From the age of four to sixteen, Cortázar lived in Banfield, a suburb about half an hour by train from Buenos Aires. After his father abandoned the family when Julio was six-years-old, Julio's mother cared for her son and daughter, Ofelia, but under serious economic difficulties. Banfield too added an aura of trouble for young Julio. Cortázar later described the suburb as conducive to lovers and delinquents because of its poor lighting, yet there he also relished spending his youth—despite suffering from chronic asthma—exploring gardens replete with dogs, turtles, and parrots.

Cortázar was an avid reader from an early age, attracted especially to Edgar Allen Poe, whose complete works he later translated into Spanish. Cortázar wrote novels and poems in grade school that he characterized as weepy and romantic. Yet when his mother, after discovering some of the poems, questioned their authenticity because they were so sophisticated, Cortázar remembered feeling pained that his mother would accuse him of plagiarism. After secondary school, Cortázar qualified both as a primary and later as a high school teacher in 1937. He abandoned further academic studies to help support his family. With his certification he was able to find teaching posts Buenos Aires near first in Bolívar and then in Chivilcoy during the years 1939 through 1945. Then, with the help of a former classmate, Cortázar received a post to teach French literature at

the University of Cuyo in Mendoza near the Andes in 1946, despite the fact that he did not have a university degree.

In all of his teaching positions, Cortázar, though not actively involved in politics, garnered a confusing reputation, at first a left-winger and then in Mendoza as an extreme rightist. With the rise of Juan Domingo Perón in 1946, Cortázar resigned his position at the University to avoid further confrontation with Peronist and fascist supporters in the university's administration. Again through the help of friends, Cortázar became the manager of *Cámara del libro*, a publisher's association. He also began freelancing as a translator thanks to his command of both French and English.

He spent the years from 1946 to 1951 in Buenos Aires improving his writing, or, it might be said becoming satisfied with it. In 1938, Cortázar had already published under the pseudonym Julio Denis a book of poems entitled *Presencia* (*Presence*) and several articles including one on Rimbaud, but held back his other writing because he felt it did not meet his own high standards. It must have given Cortázar some degree of satisfaction, then, that Jorge Luis Borges published, in 1946, in the very prestigious magazine *Sur*, Cortázar's first short story called "La casa tomada" ("The House Taken Over"). Even so, his play, *Los reyes* (*The Kings*) received little critical notice when it was published in 1949. This initial period closed in 1951 with the publication of his first collection of stories *Bestiario* (*Bestiary*) and his departure from Argentina. Not only the surge of Peronism but also the award of a scholarship from the French government influenced his decision to move to Paris where Cortázar would spend the rest of his life.

The early years in Paris were difficult ones. Yet once Cortázar gained a post as translator for UNESCO, his life settled into constant work on his writing. He married his first wife Aurora Bernárdez in 1953. Though they divorced in the mid 1960's, Cortázar continued to consider Aurora a vital force in his writing and the intended reader of his most famous and successful novel, *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*), published in 1963.

In the period preceding the appearance of *Rayuela*, Cortázar published the collections of stories: *Final del juego* (*End of the*

*Game*) in 1956, *Las armas secretas* (*Secret Arms*) in 1959, and the novel *Los premios* (*The Winners*) in 1960. A collection challenging generic classification entitled *Historias de cronopios y de famas* (*Cronopios and famas*) appeared in 1962. It is a gathering of vignettes, observations, and verbal explorations that distinguished Cortázar from his contemporaries in what became known as the Latin American “Boom.” With *Rayuela*, Cortázar joined the other “Boom” notables—Carlos Fuentes (*La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, or *The Death of Artemio Cruz*) and Mario Vargas Llosa (*La ciudad y los perros*, or *The Time of the Hero*)—in the creative explosion that augured the publication of such fundamental Latin American works as *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) by Gabriel García Márquez and *Tres tristes tigres* (*Three Trapped Tigers*) by Guillermo Cabrera Infante. At the same time, Borges, his fellow Argentine, continued to move the literary world with his stunning short fiction and poetry. In 1966, Cortázar published one of his best collections of short stories, *Todos los fuegos el fuego* (*All Fires the Fire*). That same year, *Rayuela* was translated into English by Pantheon in New York and into French by Gallimard in Paris.

During this period, Cortázar began to expand his political horizons. Though he continued his self-imposed exile in France, Cortázar had yet to participate actively in any political debate. In 1962, Cortázar’s first visit to Cuba induced his subsequent public endorsement of the Cuban revolution. In 1965, Cortázar published a story dedicated to Che Guevara entitled “Reunión” (collected in *Todos los fuegos el fuego*) and declared, in the following year, his intentions to fight for Latin American independence. On one of these visits to Cuba, Cortázar met Ugné Karvelis, his second partner. In stark contrast to the refined and sensitive Aurora, Ugné spoke loudly, drank, and participated ferociously in political debate. In 1971, Ugné was at Cortázar’s side to witness Salvador Allende take control in Chile. Then, in 1973, Cortázar signed over the proceeds from his novel *El libro de Manuel* (*A Manual for Manuel*) to aid political prisoners in Argentina. His political activities continued in Latin America throughout the seventies. In 1979, though, he left Ugné to marry Carol Dunlop, a Canadian writer. Dunlop was both cultured and

politically active, having openly opposed the Vietnam War. That same year, Cortázar traveled to Nicaragua to offer his support for the Sandinista revolution.

Cortázar continued his literary production during these politically active years. In 1967, he published a volume of stories, essays and poems entitled *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* (*Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*). Cortázar provoked critical skepticism with the appearance of his novel *62: Modelo para amar* (*62: A Model Kit*) in 1968, followed the same year by *Ultimo Round* (*Last Round*), a collection of essays, poems, and stories. Later publications included *Un tal Lucas* (*A Certain Lucas*) in 1979 and another collection of short stories entitled *Queremos tanto a Glenda* (*We love Glenda So Much and Other Tales*) in 1980.

Cortázar's final years were filled both with success and pain. On July 24, 1981, François Mitterrand awarded French citizenship to Cortázar. He was also diagnosed that year with leukemia. Cortázar spent 1982 traveling with Carol Dunlop until her death that November. In 1983, Cortázar went once again to Cuba to participate in intellectual and political activities in favor of Latin American liberation. That year he also saw his mother in Buenos Aires during a visit that would be his farewell to Argentina. Cortázar died in Paris on February 12, 1984 and was buried next to his wife Carol in Montparnasse. In 1986, the Spanish publishing house Alfaguarra began the publication of Julio Cortázar's complete works including those texts left unpublished during his lifetime.



## PLOT SUMMARY

### of “Axolotl”

“Axolotl” first appeared in *Final del juego* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1964). The first-person narrator announces at the outset that, by the time of the telling of his story, he is an axolotl, or larval salamander. How he changed his identity is the point of his tale. Thus, from the first lines of the text, the reader is challenged to believe or disbelieve the narrator’s story.

A slight burst of green in the wintery Paris morning reminds the narrator of his fondness for viewing the lions and panthers at the Jardin des Plantes. Despite the nearby tulips, the lions in the zoo appear to be sad, so the narrator decides on a change of pace and goes to the aquarium. The fish bore him but the axolotls catch his eye such that after an hour of observing them, he can think of nothing else. Later, the narrator spends time consulting academic texts, learning that the axolotls are the larvae of Mexican salamanders which are edible and whose oil was once used medicinally. Yet instead of depending on specialized information, the narrator prefers to conduct his own study of the creatures with “little pink Aztec faces.” (4) He begins daily visits and immediately feels a silent connection with them.

As he stares at the faces pressed against their glass enclosure, he feels almost ashamed. There are nine specimens in the group. Focusing on one, the narrator notes golden eyes, a translucent rosy body about six inches long, and a delicate tail. The narrator’s observations concentrate on colors and shapes as he studies his first subject. The axolotl’s feet appear most slender and detailed “ending in tiny fingers with minutely human nails.” (5) The golden eyes are ringed by a black halo and suggest an interior that is both inviting and mysterious. These stand out in contrast to the creature’s pink flesh as do the triangular head and mouth. The narrator notes that where one might expect ears, the axolotl has “three tiny sprigs red as coral” (5) that regularly stiffen and relax. This minute and regular movement belies the axolotl’s relative immobility—as the narrator explains, speaking suddenly from the axolotl’s perspective: “It’s that we don’t enjoy moving a lot, and the tank is so cramped—we barely move in any direction

and we're hitting one of the others with our tail or our head—difficulties arise, fights, tiredness. The time feels like it's less if we stay quietly.” (5) This lack of motion suggests a tranquility that first attracted the narrator to the axolotls.

In their lethargy, the narrator perceives the possibility of another kind of existence and in their eyes another way of seeing. These sensations suggest both a dizzying depth and an inviting closeness that fuels the narrator's obsession. Fixating on the triangular head and tiny golden eyes, he comes to the conclusion that the axolotls “were not animals.” (6)

His imagination takes further hold of his thoughts. By way of their gaze, he hears them communicate: “save us, save us.” Yet the narrator struggles to understand their existence; to him the axolotls are not animals nor are they really human beings. Their Aztec face suggests both disguise and cruelty as they compel him with their penetrating eyes.

The narrator's fear is temporarily dispelled by the presence of other visitors and the guard who, according to the narrator, must have thought him a bit crazy. The fear actually stems from the realization that the axolotls are consuming him bit by bit with their golden-eyed gaze. Cortázar's protagonist quickly abandons this brief mention of other humans present in the aquarium. He visits daily, his fear replaced by recognition of their pain and suffering. In the end, identification is complete; he seems an axolotl:

So there was nothing strange in what happened. My face was pressed against the glass of the aquarium, my eyes were attempting once more to penetrate the mystery of those eyes of gold without iris, without pupil. I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the outside of the tank, I saw it on the other side of the glass. Then my face drew back and I understood. (8)

Momentarily he is both the visitor in the aquarium gawking into the glass tank and an axolotl peering outward at the visitor. At first the horror analogous to being buried alive consumes the doubled voice of the narrator. He feels condemned to live in the tiny pink body retaining his human thoughts. Yet at the touch of

another axolotl's tiny foot, the narrator realizes he is one of the group staring with golden eyes out at the visitor.

The narrative shift splits the character into two by using both "he" and "I" to distinguish the entities: the visitor is now mute, and the axolotl gains a voice. The transition of existence appears complete, circling back to the opening premise:

I believe that all this succeeded in communicating something to him in those first days, when I was still he. And in this final solitude to which he no longer comes, I console myself by thinking that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he's making up a story, he's going to write all this about axolotls. (9)

Note: All quotes are taken from Cortázar, Julio. *Blow-Up and Other Stories*. Paul Blackburn, trans. New York: Pantheon, 1967. This collection first appeared in 1963 entitled *End of the Game and Other Stories*.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS IN

### “Axolotl”

The **first-person narrator** remains unnamed throughout the story. The narrator’s obsession with the axolotls provokes a change of identity as the frequent visits to their pavilion in the aquarium leads to the narrator’s joining the axolotls in their watery home. Since the narrator contends that his identity has morphed into that of the axolotl, his narration actually becomes a circular monologue.

The **Axolotls** are the larval stage of salamanders, probably Mexican in origin, distinctive for their colorful features, especially their feet, eyes, and flesh. The narrator in particular calls attention to the bright colors and minute details of the axolotl body. As characters in the story, the axolotls add no spoken dialogue but provoke a silent cerebral conversation in the mind of the narrator.

## CRITICAL VIEWS ON

### “Axolotl”

MAURICE J. BENNETT ON “AXOLOTL” AND *LOS REYES*  
(*THE KINGS*)

[Maurice J. Bennett has published several critical essays on the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Jorge Luis Borges and Charles Brockden Brown. In this essay, Bennett considers the text from a Jungian perspective concentrating on the function of dreams about monsters. In this selection, Bennett cites Cortázar’s play, *The Kings* (*Los reyes*, 1949), to explain the axolotls in relation to the Minotaur story present in the play as a method of emphasizing continuity between man and nature.]

In his early play, *The Kings* (1949), Cortázar presented a more or less unretouched version of the Minotaur story, in which the monster was a symbol of those a-rational forces, identified by Jung. The play repeated the opposition posited by the Romantics between the rational consciousness and nature, so that Theseus’ destruction of the Minotaur was in some sense symbolic of the reason’s assault on the a-rational self. Just before he dies, Cortázar’s creature warns his slayer: “If you kill me, you will diminish yourself ... you will fall into yourself, like crumbling cliffs and the dead.... You will remain here, alone within the walls, and there in the sea.”<sup>6</sup> He thus prophesies the isolated, sterile, solipsistic consciousness against which Romantics and post-Romantics have long protested.

The “dark, humid” character of the aquarium building in “Axolotl” certainly assimilates it to the labyrinth archetype, and, like the Minotaur, the axolotl that awaits the narrator as an unsuspecting modern version of Theseus is a hybrid form with its humanlike feet and inhuman eyes. But the tale dismisses the Minotaur’s union of man and animal as irrelevant to a civilization that has so domesticated nature that it can be sentimental about

lions and tigers. It is the axolotl who is the absolute Other, with its pupiless, lidless eyes, its extreme immobility, and its association with barbaric cultures destroyed by rational Europe. As in Cortázar's early play, this monster, too, delivers Theseus a message: the choice to be made between plenitude and spiritual impoverishment. This time, however, it is Theseus who is destroyed by the monster as the axolotls consume the narrator "slowly with their eyes, in a cannibalism of gold" (p. 7). Jung wrote that such a devouring by the monster-dragon, the saurian, can be a symbol of resurrection and rejuvenation.<sup>7</sup> In this tale, the essential meaning of what may be regarded as a kind of transfiguration is suggested by the axolotl-narrator's closing words:

I am an axolotl for good now, and if I think like a man it's only because every axolotl thinks like a man inside his rosy stone semblance. I believe that all this succeeded in communicating something to him in those first days, when I was still he. And in this final solitude to which he no longer comes, I console myself by thinking that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he's making up a story, he's going to write all this about axolotls. (p. 9)

Cortázar thus retrieves the ancient idea of a fully sentient universe, where consciousness is not limited to man alone but is an essential attribute of the creation: the fundamental continuity between man and nature is thereby reestablished, however tenuously. Further, although the axolotls represent a nature that is conscious and knowing, they are also inarticulate, and the axolotl's closing words reveal a scheme whereby the human narrator has been made a vehicle of expression for their speechless awareness. Rational man, *homo sapiens*, is synonymous with *homo loquens*, the animal capable of speech; what distinguishes him among creatures is not what he knows but his capacity for elaborate communication. In these terms, humanity may be regarded as mute nature's attempt at self-expression. Modern man's separation from nature has left him with nothing

to say, so that just as the axolotls' immobility complements the narrator's coming and going, so their *knowing* speechlessness complements his unknowing *speech*.

## NOTES

6. Quoted in Canclini, p. 21. "Si tú me matas, tú te disminuirás, al conocerme serás menos, to irás cayendo en ti mismo, como se van desmorando los acantilados y los muertos.... Te quedarás, aquí, solo en los muros y allá dentro del mar."

7. Jung, *L'homme*, p. 293. "... le dragon est en même temps une possibilité de guérison, une possibilité de renaissance; lorsqu'un individu est englouti par un dragon, il n'y a pas là seulement un événement négatif..."

—Maurice J. Bennett, "A Dialogue of Gazes: Metamorphosis and Epiphany in Julio Cortázar's 'Axolotl.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 23, no. 1 (1986): 61–62.

## BRETT LEVINSON REGARDING IDENTITIES

[The author of *Ends of Literature: the Latin American "Boom" in the Neoliberal Marketplace* (2001) and *Secondary Moderns: Mimesis, History, and Revolution in Lezama Lima's "American expression"* (1996), Brett Levinson has also published scholarly essays on Latin American authors and postcolonialism. In the extract provided, Professor Levinson poses several questions regarding identity—both the narrator's and that of Latin America—based on his interpretation of the text. Analogy and dissimilarity are elements examined by Levinson to explain his views on alienation, the Other, and the origins of identity.]

Identity and identification are in fact the story's main focus. Thus, the man-observer indicates that the first time he looked through the glass of the axolotls' aquarium he immediately identified with the larvae: "comprendí que estábamos vinculados, que algo infinitamente perdido y distante seguía sin embargo uniéndonos" (422). Even though he recognized that axolotls were infinitely far away, the observer felt a secret connection.

This impression is reiterated later in the text: “Y sin embargo estaban cerca.... La absoluta falta de semejanza de los axolotl con el ser humano me probó que mi reconocimiento era válido, que no me apoyaba en anologías fáciles” (424). Once more we see that not despite, but because of the absolute distance (“la absoluta falta de semejanza”) between observer and “observee,” human being and axolotl, modern man in Europe and “premodern Aztec” creature—such unlikenesses aside, the two are “vinculados,” tied, extremely near, perhaps identical.

This last citation concerning “easy analogies” and the “absolute lack of similarity” is of particular importance to the story as a whole. An analogy—at least, traditionally—assumes that two distinct or separate beings possess some sort of familiar (even if repressed) resemblance; they are different, but never absolutely dissimilar. How then can there be an analogy of *absolutely* unlike entities, the man and the axolotl? At least two possible answers surface.<sup>8</sup> The first is that the observer and the axolotl, modern man and Aztec, secretly belong to the same family, in which case the story is unambiguously about the link between identity and origins: about the repressed relationship of the modern (Latin American?) man and pre-Columbian worlds, one in which the pre-colonial subject represents the lost authentic self (“algo infinitamente perdido y distante”) of the contemporary, colonized person. Within such a reading the “lack of similarity” is not “absolute” (since the man and axolotl, in fact, are not completely dissimilar) as the narrator himself claims; the narrator’s use of this adjective can be attributed to his initial misunderstanding of the man/axolotl relationship.

The second possibility is that the story develops an alternative notion of analogy, one which is not based upon similarity and difference but solely upon difference: upon the uncanny bond, the strange being-together of unrelated entities.<sup>9</sup> I use the term “uncanny” here because this kind of bond recalls the thesis put forth by Freud in the well-known essay by that name. Indeed, for Freud uncanny moments occur precisely when a person finds him or herself in contact or at one with (at home with) the stranger, the un-familiar or the unrelated entity—a stranger, who is most often the person’s own double. The second feasible



reading of the “analogy” of “unlike entities” can be stated as follows: in “Axolotl” the protagonist, eying the axolotl, witnesses the awful return of his own “lost” or repressed double, a double that is both analogous to him (since it is his double) and absolutely un-familiar (not of his family or kind, uncanny: one here thinks of a corpse, which is simultaneously absolutely unlike and perfectly like the living being). This interpretation can be supplemented by recalling the “los axolotl” phrase, where “axolotl” appears to function semantically as a proper name. Is it possible that when the *nameless* man observes the placard with the word “axolotl” written upon it, he unconsciously beholds his own true, but lost or missing family name (which provokes the ensuing obsession with axolotls), the name of the father, and hence the name of the origin? Is it not also possible that this “true name” is at the same time foreign to him, an unreadable sign (the “axolotl” or the “x” as the narrator’s uncanny name, as his representation or “double”), as if the man’s own roots and name were somehow improper, not his own but those of an Other?

## NOTES

8. I cannot, unfortunately, explore all the possibilities for the phrase “easy analogies.” For instance, it is difficult to say whether the protagonist’s refusal of easy analogies is a refusal of *easy* analogies in favor of *difficult* ones (the analogy of men and axolotls, for example) or a refusal of a facile thinking process, one grounded on analogy: easy analogies. Obviously, in my analysis I concentrate on the first of these options.

9. Are the man and the axolotl related? Are they both human, members of the family of man? The impossibility of answering these questions is made apparent throughout the narrative. At various points, for instance, the narrator focuses on the aborted hands of the axolotls, hands which lead him to believe that the axolotls are not disconnected from human beings. Perhaps he sees the axolotls, these aquatic *larvae* with “hands,” as “humans” who have not yet *evolved* or developed—not unlike the French signifier “axolotl,” which has not evolved phonemically.

—Brett Levinson. “The Other Origin: Cortázar and Identity Politics.” *Latin American Literary Review* 22, no. 44 (1994): 8–8, 18.

PAMELA J. McNAB STUDIES SOURCES, ESPECIALLY POE

[Pamela J. McNab is Associate Professor of Foreign Languages at Albion College and the author of critical works on Rosario Castellanos as well as Cortázar. In this essay, Professor McNab offers several possible sources for Cortázar's fantastic tale of the little creatures called axolotls. She follows the classical sources (Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Inferno*) with a compelling consideration of the parallels between Cortázar's text and three by Poe, particularly "The Premature Burial," based on the immobility of the creatures and the obsession of the narrators.]

After his mental transferal to an axolotl's body, he laments: "To realize that was, for the first moment, like the horror of a man *buried alive* awaking to his fate" (8). His sensation of entrapment is so overwhelming, he soon reiterates: "The horror began—I learned in the same moment—of believing myself prisoner in the body of an axolotl, metamorphosed into him with my human mind intact, *buried alive* in an axolotl, condemned to move lucidly among unconscious creatures" (8–9). The repeated comparison of the narrator's state to having been buried alive creates a sense of horror similar to what we find in Edgar Allan Poe's work. As with some of the other literary influences we have discussed, Cortázar was well acquainted with Poe's theories of the short story as well as with his fiction. To cite just one example, Cortázar apparently pays homage to Poe's story *MS. Found in a Bottle* in his own story entitled *Manuscrito hallado en un bolsillo* (Manuscript found in a pocket).<sup>14</sup> Cortázar was also the first to translate Poe into Spanish, although two earlier Spanish-American authors, largely responsible for shaping and popularizing the short story genre in Spanish, had also studied Poe: the Uruguayan Horacio Quiroga and Cortázar's own countryman, the celebrated Jorge Luis Borges. Certainly, Cortázar knew of Poe's penchant for the motif of live burial,

which lurks in several of Poe's stories, most notably in *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Black Cat*, and *The Premature Burial*.

Of these three, the story most closely linked to *Axolotl* is *The Premature Burial*, due to its philosophical implications. After recounting several cases of people buried alive, Poe's narrator concludes that he, too, has been buried alive; he describes his fate as "the most terrific of ... [the ghastly] extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality."<sup>15</sup> Poe's narrator further remarks that: "The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?" (420). These excerpts touch on some of the characteristics which make *Axolotl* such a mysterious story: the axolotls are frequently described in terms that introduce and then confound two opposite characteristics—they embody both light and dark, they are both humanlike and yet, at other times, animals that resemble us very little. Not surprisingly, they also seem both dead and alive.

Although the narrator does not directly address the life/death polarity, he examines it indirectly by observing the axolotls' movement, or rather their stillness. The narrator's preoccupation with their immobility surfaces in the story's second sentence: "[I] stayed for hours watching them, observing their *immobility*, their *faint movements*" (3). Clearly, their slight motion demonstrates that they are alive, yet their stillness almost obliterates this. Their lack of movement situates them very near the dividing line. Only one additional use of the verb *mover*, "to move," appears until the narrator's transformation. This example is modified by a negative adverb which minimizes its effect: "once in a while a foot would barely move" (5). Significantly, it is only a part of the axolotl's body that moves, and not the whole axolotl, thereby further diminishing the impression of motion. In effect, only the expansion and contraction of the gills truly indicates that they are alive.

Eventually, immobility emerges as one of the axolotls' salient characteristics, emphasized by six instances of the word *immovil*, "immobile," throughout the story. This silent stillness captivates the narrator, who claims: "It was their quietness that made me lean toward them the first time I saw the axolotls" (5). As he

attempts to comprehend them better, he comments: "Obscurely, I seemed to understand their secret will, to abolish space and time within an indifferent immobility" (5–6). This curious phrase could very well refer to the "immobility" of death, which is one means of abolishing space and time. Ironically, the greater the narrator's preoccupation with the axolotls, the more he begins to resemble them, spending hours motionless by their tank. Additionally, the axolotls' descriptions in terms of inanimate objects further contribute to their lifeless appearance. The body is compared to a Chinese figurine, its eyes are described as "two orifices, like brooches, wholly of transparent gold, lacking any life but looking," and its head is a "rosy stone" and a "lifeless stone" (5). In short, although the axolotls are indeed alive, they move so little that the narrator is repeatedly inclined to compare them to inanimate objects.

Despite observing the axolotls' motionless existence, the narrator nonetheless has difficulty accepting this stillness when he becomes an axolotl. Curiously, Poe's query about life and death, "Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?" (420), greatly resembles Dante's rendition of the thieves' metamorphosis into amphibians: "now two new semblances appeared and faded, / one face where neither face began nor ended" (216; 68–69). Poe's question, "But where, meantime, was the soul?" (420), seems relevant to *Axolotl* since evidently only the spirits of the man and the axolotl trade places.

In exploring the buried-alive motif, Cortázar may also have patterned his narrator on Poe's. Both are first-person male narrators who become so obsessed with one subject that their prophecies become, or almost become, self-fulfilling. Poe's narrator, haunted by people who were buried alive, imagines himself to be suffering from the same; Cortázar's narrator, who spends so many hours pondering the axolotl's watery existence, finally experiences it firsthand. Thus, Cortázar takes Poe's tale of terror one step further. Whereas Poe remains inside the boundaries of what is possible or "real" and thus maintains the identification between the reader and the narrator of his tale, Cortázar surpasses these limitations to press into the realm of true fantasy, to create a situation so peculiar that the reader

cannot help but feel estranged from the text. Considering Cortázar's keen interest in Poe, it seems probable that Poe's tales of live burial, especially *The Premature Burial*, influenced Cortázar's unique, and even more extreme, depiction of the "unreal" found in the final paragraphs of *Axolotl*.

## NOTES

14. The Spanish-language story can be found in *Octaedro* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1987) 49–63. The English translation is available in *We Love Glenda So Much and A Change of Light*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Vintage Books, 1984) 249–63.

15. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Premature Burial," *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Roslyn, New York: Black's Reader's Service Company, 1927) 420. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

—Pamela J. McNab. "Julio Cortázar's *Axolotl*: Literary Archaeology of the Unreal." *International Fiction Review* 24, nos. 1–2 (1997): 17–21.

## HARRY L. ROSSER ON THE READER'S THOUGHT PROCESS

[Harry L. Rosser, Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies at Boston College, is the author of *Conflict and Transition in Mexico: The Fiction of Social Realism* (1980) along with scholarly essays on Latin American authors including García Márquez, Rulfo, and Bello. In this extract, Professor Rosser focuses on suspense and the blurring of reality in the reader's mind. Rosser suggests that Cortázar provokes these elements by a shifting of pronouns and verb tenses to undermine the reader's rational thought process.]

As in a number of Cortázar's stories, suspense in "Axolotl" is not dependent upon the element of surprise but upon the particular experience described and upon the atmosphere of tension in which that experience takes place. Cortázar has stated that it is of utmost importance to him to hold the attention of his reader-accomplices, as he likes to call them, and to widen their horizons.<sup>4</sup> Thus he advocates a style that, in his words, "consists of those elements of form and expression that fit the thematic

nature of the story in a precise fashion, elements that give it its most penetrating and original visual and auditory form, that make it unique, unforgettable, that fix it forever in its time, in its atmosphere and in its most primordial sense.”<sup>5</sup> “Axolotl” is typical of Cortázar in other ways: it introduces a protagonist in a situation characterized by a routine existence; it recounts the way in which an alien presence interrupts that routine; and it reveals—at least partially—the consequences of that intervention.<sup>6</sup>

“Axolotl” is a story in which the line between reality and fantasy gradually blurs in the reader’s mind. It is narrated from several different perspectives that shift unpredictably and whose sources are somewhat ambiguous. Intentional confusion is caused by the skillful use of personal pronouns, verbal suffixes, and several verb tenses that are associated with the varying points of view. The fact that pronouns can be readily abandoned in Spanish in favor of implications carried by the verb makes for even more subtle variations in perspective (e.g., “*era*” can mean “I was,” “you were” [formal singular], “he was,” “she was,” or “it was”). In addition to this, the reader must keep track of to whom the first person singular refers as well as of the function of the first person plural and the third person singular and plural. There is the “ego I” of the man before and after the metamorphosis; there is the collective “we” of the man and the salamanders, and of the salamanders as a group; there is the use of the third person singular “he” and plural “they” by the man, both before and after the change, as well as by a kind of omniscient narrator.

The multiple perspectives established through the use of various pronouns and verbal suffixes is developed even further by a constant change in the temporal context. Several verb tenses appear in the same short paragraph or even in the same sentence: “The axolotls huddled on the wretched, narrow (only I can know how narrow and wretched) floor of stone and moss.” (p. 3) The story begins in the past (“There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls.” p. 3), skips back and forth in time and then draws to a close in the present. The use of the present tense imbues the account with a sense of open-endedness. The last words of the salamander are: “And in this final solitude, to which

he no longer comes, I console myself by thinking that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he's making up a story, he's going to write all this about axolotls." (p. 9)

Taken together, these literary techniques underscore the multiplicity of reality which Cortázar is so intent upon conveying through his fiction. The constant interchange of perspectives and temporal planes that the techniques create undermines the reliability of rational thought.

## NOTES

4. In the opening paragraphs of *Cronopios and Famas*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon, 1969), which serve as a kind of preface to the work that follows as well as to his fiction in general, Cortázar makes it clear that he is intent upon involving his readers in another way of seeing, in another way of life.

5. Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento," p. 10 (translation mine).

6. For a detailed study of the characteristics of Cortázar's short prose fiction as a whole see Alfred MacAdam, *El individuo y el otro* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Librería, 1971).

—Harry L. Rosser. "The Voice of the Salamander: Cortázar's 'Axolotl' and the Transformation of the Self." *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1983): 421–422, 426.

## DORIS T. WIGHT LOOKS AT LUNATIC RAVINGS AND LANGUAGE

[Doris T. Wight has written on Jonathan Culler and the demise of structuralism along with numerous comparative essays on T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein. In this short study on "Axolotl," Professor Wight focuses on the impossibility inherent in Cortázar's fantastic text. The lunatic ravings of the narrator force the reader to consider other potential realities, which fail equally, leaving only a "language world" in which to ponder the many questions raised by the little Aztec creatures.]

It is precisely because the narrative implies from the very beginning that it is the raving of a lunatic that we reject the explanation that this is but a madman's tale. Or perhaps one

should put it this way: we never believe a liar more than when he tells us bluntly that he is lying. Similarly, when we are told that what we are encountering is nothing but nonsense, meaningless fancy, emptily delusionary dreams, then we become intensely, immediately convinced that before us, behind the facade, lies Truth. Thus Cortázar captures us from the start of his tale, and never looses his grip on our credulity and helpless curiosity about the forbidden—for we cannot help interpreting claims to Untruth as glorious opportunities to find the dazzling light, the Secret!

Along with the narrator we become enchanted immediately with the mysterious axolotl and convinced of its importance to our own destinies. That little rosy stone-headed, golden-eyed creature in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes that huddles on the floor of moss and stone in the water tank with its eight fellows receiving visits morning after morning by the human visitor: what is it? The entranced visitor who observes it has learned in the library at Sainte-Geneviève, we are told, that:

los axolotl son formas larvales, provistas de branquias, de una especie de batracios del género *amblistoma*. (127)

axolotls are the larval stage (provided with gills) of a species of salamander of the genus *Abystoma*. (78)

The visitor had already learned. by reading the placard at the top of the tank and “by looking at them and their pink Aztec faces” that axolotls are Mexican, that “specimens of theta had been found in Africa capable of living on dry land during the periods of drought,” etc.

Here might lie an almost inaccessible, perhaps truly inaccessible allegory: the Aztec, slave of his body in a world-culture that has left him behind historically, exists as an artifact in a museum or aquarium or library’s encyclopedia for middle-class Europeans or Americans to visit and perhaps become infatuated by. For the “blind gaze, the diminutive gold disc without expression and nonetheless terribly shining” sends forth, the narration tells us, a message: “Save us, save us.” Marxists



might identify instantly the impossible object as a Third Or Fourth World victim of capitalist exploitation....

But no. Even yet the analysis is not ringing quite true to the text. The analysis, self-assured, does not match the contradictions of the text itself. After telling us in paragraph three, for instance, that he has learned that axolotls are animals, the narrator (the *narration*, to be more exact) denies that facile identification in paragraph six and explicitly states, "They were not animals," for axolotls are discovered to have existed much farther back in the evolutionary chain than *animals*—perhaps justifying their existence in the Garden of Plants. Again, in paragraph seven the larvae are identified as "witnesses of something, and at times like horrible judges," but of a "something" increasingly elusive. Then the word "larva" slips away from us too, for we are told, very pointedly, that "larva means disguise and also phantom." Meaning has slipped away, and now contradiction is all that we can cling to, an oxymoronic confusion that describes the tiny Aztec faces as "without expression" but simultaneously "of an implacable cruelty." And how could we know of that cruelty except through expression on the closely observed Aztec faces, since axolotls cannot speak? The mystery grows and grows, leading to the question that the narrative asks at paragraph's end, "What semblance was awaiting its hour?"

—Doris T. Wight. "Cortázar's 'Axolotl.'" *The Explicator* no. 2 45 (1987): 60–61.

## PLOT SUMMARY OF

# **“Bestiary”**

At the opening of “Bestiary,” young Isabel is sent to spend the summer in the country at the Funes estate despite the concerns of her mother and Inés, who explains: “Not so much because of the tiger, after all they’re very careful in that respect. But it’s such a depressing house and only that boy to play with her...” (78). An apparently simple story of a child’s summer, told mainly through letters home, is about to unfold with the curious twist created by the tiger in residence at the Funes house. It should be noted that the tiger’s presence is never explained, leading some critics to suppose it is a fantasy of Isabel’s creation, or, at the least, serves other than a literal function in the story.

That night, as she lies in bed, Isabel conjures the events and people that await her: playing with Nino, the animals, the park, and even Rema’s soft hands. She frets that all these lovely thoughts are just a dream. Yet just a week later her mother and Inés see Isabel off amid hugs and kisses at the Constitution train station. She puts aside her fear of traveling alone by remembering the allowance in her bag and by examining all the places rushing by the train window. She is unnecessarily nervous that no one will meet her; the phaeton and its driver Don Nicanor are waiting when she descends from the train. Thoughts of Rema’s hands and pastries with vanilla cream fill her head as they drive toward the estate, Los Horneros.

For this visit, Isabel has a room of her own—a grownup’s room. The bathroom is two doors down “but inside doors through the rooms so that you could go without checking beforehand where the tiger was.” (80) It is in the dining room that Isabel finds the family assembled: Nino, the boy who will be her playmate; Luis his father; Rema his mother; and the Kid, Nino’s uncle. At the table, family dynamics become apparent. Luis reads a book. Rema restfully passes the plates, and the Kid interrupts the scene with complaints or commentary. The children are seated across the table from one another. Nino kicks Isabel under the table when he needs to say something to her. In

any room or for any gathering, though, Isabel notes that one must first check for the tiger.

Isabel quickly adjusts to the environment. Since the house and grounds are so expansive, the children's activities are never hampered. There is only one room they do not enter: "They never went in to the Kid's study because they were afraid he would throw a tantrum. Rema told them that it was better that way, she said it as though she were warning them; they'd already learned how to read her silences." (82)

In Isabel's opinion, there is a sadness surrounding Los Horneros. Despite this feeling, she and Nino quickly become occupied with learning to use the microscope Luis gave his son. Isabel makes notes on their experiments and the two children assemble an herbarium of leaves and flowers. Isabel still is displeased: "It annoyed her a little that almost all the leaves were green, nearly all smooth, and nearly all lanceolate." (83) This changes when their activities turn to ant hunting, for which Luis has given them a large glass tank. Isabel senses that he did this to keep the children outside, thus having the house quiet for his endless reading. Isabel notices at the same time that Rema is always uneasy around the Kid.

The children collect only black ants. Little by little Isabel abandons her note taking and Nino expresses a desire to return to the garden. Isabel prefers to stay in and observe the ants:

The ant-farm was worth the whole of Los Horneros, and it gave her immense pleasure to think that the ants came and went without fear of any tiger ... And now she liked to rehearse the real world in the one of glass, now that she felt a little like a prisoner, now that she was forbidden to go down to the dining room until Rema said so. (85)

One day while she is on her own, Isabel's gazing at the large tank is interrupted by Rema. Isabel moves her gaze to Rema's hand and remembered Rema's discomfort when her fingers got caught in the Kid's as she served him a cup of coffee. Rema's hand now blocks the sun from hitting the glass of the ant-farm. Suddenly Isabel asks if the Kid is mad at Rema. "The hand

moved across the glass like a bird through a window ... Isabel felt afraid of the question herself, a dull fear, made no sense, maybe it wasn't the question but seeing Rema run off that way..." (86).

Her fear is replaced on another afternoon by happy childhood games. During that siesta Nino and Isabel enjoy a game of handball against the house wall. A farmhand's son joins them. The happiness of the game triggers Isabel's understanding of her presence there at Los Horneros that summer. It is because of Nino, not her. Both angry and happy, she hits the ball hard. The shattering glass of the Kid's bedroom window ends the carefree game:

"'Filthy pains-in-the-ass.'

The little peon fled. Nino set himself alongside Isabel, she felt him shaking with the same wind as the willows.

'We didn't mean to do it, uncle.'" (87)

That night it is difficult for Isabel to sleep. Despite Rema's comforting the girl, the ant-farm brings back vividly in the girl's mind the brutal scene of the Kid beating Nino. Only Rema stepping between Nino and the Kid stopped the beating. The Kid merely laughed. The children hadn't seen the Kid coming:

[W]hen he got up to them he grabbed Nino, jerked at him, said something about the ball breaking the window in his room and started to hit him, he looked at Rema while he hit him, he seemed furious with Rema and she defied him with her eyes for a moment ...The whole evening meal was a deceit, a lie, Luis thought that Nino was crying from having taken a tumble, the Kid looked at Rema as if to order her to shut up.... (88)

Usually the foreman keeps everyone advised of the tiger's whereabouts. But often the family members must rely on each other to find out about the tiger. The adults always believe Nino's information on the tiger but not so much that from Isabel, as she is new to the estate. Gradually they come to believe her equally. At night, the Kid makes the rounds to check for the tiger. Isabel notices that when he does this, the Kid carries a revolver

and stick. Isabel's habit is to check with Nino about the tiger. She does not want to bother Rema with such questions and she never wants to ask the Kid.

The narrator of the story has provided these details as Isabel writes home to her mother and Inés. The reader can imagine that Isabel is reviewing the events of that summer in her mind as she writes. In her letter, Isabel observes: "Rema sends her kisses, she is fine. I think she's sad, the same as Luis who is very nice. I think that Luis has some trouble although he studies all the time." (90) Yet the girl does not provide other details about Rema and Luis: "that she heard her crying going down the hall, staggering a little ... and Luis' voice in the distance: 'What's the matter, Rema? Aren't you well?,' a silence, the whole house like an enormous ear, then a murmur and Luis' voice again: 'He's a bastard, a miserable bastard ...' almost as though he were coldly confirming a fact, making a connection, a fate." (90-91)

Because of the child's admiration and concern for Rema, on another evening Isabel obeys the Kid's orders to tell Rema to bring him lemonade. Her concern also compels her to accept Rema's plea to deliver the lemonade for her. As Rema prepares the drink, Isabel becomes absorbed in her thoughts of Rema: "A feverish wish reached her face, a wish to throw herself at Rema's feet, to let Rema pick her up in her arms, a wish to die looking at her and Rema be sorry for her, pass her cool, delicate fingers through her hair, over her eyelids..." (92-93).

The next morning Nino is the first to rise. By lunchtime, Isabel has returned from their hunt for snails in the brook and the Kid is already eating in the dining room. After coffee, Luis asks everyone where the tiger is. Isabel leaves, as if to look for the foreman. When she returns, the girl announced that the tiger was in the Kid's study, thus triggering a final family crisis.

The others continue as they had been. The children challenge each other to find Luis's tobacco. They bump into the Kid, who is annoyed by the noise, and leaves for the quiet of the library. At the Kid's first scream, Luis and the foreman with his dogs run towards the library. Isabel, however, does not move as she listens to the Kid's cries. She stares at the snails; the touch of Rema's hand on her shoulder:

ma[kes] her raise her head to look at her, to stand  
looking at her for an eternity, broken by her ferocious  
sob into Rema's skirt, her unsettled happiness, and Rema

running her hand over her hair, quieting her with a soft squeeze  
of her fingers and a murmuring against her ear, a stuttering as of  
gratitude, as of an unnamable acquiescence. (95–96)

Note: This is the title work from the collection of the same name appearing in  
first Spanish as *Bestiario*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1951.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS IN

### “Bestiary”

**Isabel** is the young protagonist of the story, sent to spend the summer with the Funes family at their estate, Los Horneros. Isabel relates her story through a third-person narration intercolated with her letter home. She enjoys collecting flora, ants, and snails with Nino, the son of the Funes family, and is excessively fond of Luis’s mother, Rema. This attachment provokes the unexpected denouement of the story.

**Nino** is the only child of Luis and Rema, and benefits from Isabel’s company. He runs about the estate immersed in experiments stimulated by the gift of a microscope from his father. Nino shares Isabel’s aversion for his uncle, the Kid.

**Luis** is the head of the Funes family, who participates little in the running of the estate in favor of spending his days reading.

**Rema** is the object of Isabel’s obsession and the sensitive wife and mother, whose behavior betrays the tension existing among the Funes adults. She seems under siege in the presence of her brother-in-law and excessively protective of the quiet that her husband prefers.

**The Kid** is annoying and brusque, quick to complain and criticize. The Kid also foists constant unwanted attentions on Rema. The young Isabel interprets Rema’s silences as the painful result of the Kid’s miserable manners.

**Isabel’s mother and Inés** agree to send Isabel to the Funes’s for the summer. Their concerns when making this decision announce for the reader the first mention of the tiger in residence at Los Horneros.

## CRITICAL VIEWS ON

# “Bestiary”

### EVELYN PICÓN GARFIELD ON CORTÁZAR’S DREAMS

[The author of *Women’s Voices from Latin America: Interviews with Six Contemporary Authors* (1985) and the editor of several collections and translations, Evelyn Picón Garfield has written widely on Cortázar and on women writers in Latin America. Garfield notes here that she learned in her interview with Cortázar that “Bestiary” is based on a dream he had and the story reflects the fascination and horror with ants that Cortázar had as a child.]

Similarly, the fantastic coexists with the real in the title story, “Bestiario.” This anecdote also originates in a dream that Cortázar had. When he was ill with a fever, in an almost delirious state he pictured a house in which a live tiger threateningly roamed the rooms. But the tiger was controlled in some way by the people who lived in the house. “Of course, that tiger was my fever to some extent, my hallucination,” he assured me.

In “Bestiario” a young girl, Isabel, visits her relatives, the Funes family. Rema and Luis, their little boy Nino and Luis’ brother, the Kid, live in a house besieged by a tiger. The animal roams the maze of rooms, tacitly regulating the lives of the inhabitants who accept its presence. Isabel adheres to the warnings used by the Funes family to prevent running into the tiger in the house. Through letters from Isabel to her mother, we sense an intimacy between her Aunt Rema and the young girl and an aversion of the two toward Rema’s brother-in-law, the Kid. Amidst the growing tension, Isabel seizes the opportunity to misinform the Kid of the tiger’s whereabouts. As she hides her face in her aunt’s lap, Isabel hears his dying screams, muffled by Rema’s skirt. The tiger as a menacing force in the house seems to echo the cruelty of the Kid toward Rema and at the same time symbolizes Isabel’s hidden desire and mechanism for disposing of her threatening uncle.



This short but intense story employs several effective techniques that are to be found in Cortázar's later works. With Isabel, he masters the sympathetic portrayal of the adolescent mind in its emotional ambiguity. His descriptions, which excel in sensual imagery, at times acquire a hallucinatory air as if in a Salvador Dalí painting or a Luis Buñuel film. In "Bestiario," Isabel's cousin and playmate Nino has an ant farm in his room. At one point in the story, when Aunt Rema appears at the doorway, her hand is reflected in the glass of the ant farm. The sight of her hand, which seems to crawl with ants, leads Isabel to associate the repulsive image with the odious Kid squeezing Rema's fingers as she served him coffee. This scene, with its provocative horror both to the reader and to Isabel, could easily recall a similar episode in Buñuel's film *Le chien andalou* of a hand crawling with ants.

When I asked Cortázar about his fascination with ants since they appear frequently in his fiction, he described a strange feeling of horror and attraction to the insect world. He recalled that at the age of seven he had a cat named Pituco. One morning he awoke to find the cat dead. Somehow it had eaten poison set out for the ants in the kitchen. He buried the cat in his own garden. The experience was his first encounter with death. Perhaps it is as a subconscious result of his experience that ants implacably find their way into the fascinating yet terrifying imagery in "Bestiario."

—Evelyn Picón Garfield, "A Swiss Cheese Reality." *Julio Cortázar*: 20–22. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1975.

## PAMELA J. McNAB ON CHILDREN AND INSECTS

[Pamela J. McNab is Associate Professor of Foreign Languages at Albion College and the author of critical works on Rosario Castellanos as well as Cortázar. Here McNab studies the symbolic elements present in "Bestiary" including the tiger, a presence frequently examined in Cortázar criticism. In this selection, she offers her interpretation of the ants and the children's

interaction with them, suggesting that the ant farm represents a miniature and enclosed version of the intrigues taking place in the story.]

The children's first extended interaction with the animal world occurs when they spend a week observing mosquito larvae through a microscope. Although the previous reference to an aquarium was fleeting, this time the narrative develops the notion of life viewed beneath glass more fully. Unlike the animal imagery to come, there is only one meaning behind the larvae symbolism. Here, studying the larvae metaphorically foreshadows what will become Isabel's secret activity: she will analyze the world of Los Horneros through the microscopic lens of her conscience and make some unpleasant discoveries, much the way she and Nino discover the "rebullente horror" of the larvae. In both cases, what begins as a harmless diversion becomes a frightening experience when the microcosm comes into focus.

In a continuation of the animals-observed-through-glass leitmotif, the creation of an ant farm constitutes the story's third section. Like the larvae under the microscopic lens, the ants within the glass container suggest the silent, subterranean forces at work in the Funes home. This animal imagery, which is even more well-developed, is the first that exhibits signification shifts. As Isabel becomes increasingly preoccupied by Rema and el Nene, she projects her emotions onto the ants and sees in them a reflection of her human environment. While grappling with issues she senses but doesn't understand, Isabel associates the ants with several people; with each new association there is an accompanying change in symbolic meaning. Consequently, these shifting associations reveal her changing attitude and growing assertiveness.

The ants themselves are concrete visual symbols of frenetic energy: "las hormigas parecían furiosas, y trabajaban hasta la noche ... repentinos arranques de furor o de vehemencia, concentraciones y desbandes sin causa visible" (149). For Isabel, the ant farm first represents a miniature version of Los Horneros, where she now feels trapped just like the ants: "le

gustaba repetir el mundo grande en el cristal, ahora que se sentía un poco presa, ahora que estaba prohibido bajar al comedor hasta que Rema les avisara” (149). Resentful of her captive state, Isabel is pleased that no tiger menaces the ants: “le encantaba pensar que las hormigas iban y venían sin miedo a ningún tigre” (149). However, she immediately contradicts herself by imagining a tiny tiger roaming behind the glass: “a veces le daba por imaginarse un tigrecito chico como una goma de borrar, rondando las galerías del formicario” (149). This image has many ramifications. First, the phrase “a veces” indicates that Isabel indulged in this fantasy more than once. But why would she inflict an imaginary tiger, like the one she so detests, on the helpless ants? This thought evidently alludes to her desire for power or her longing to be in control while also exposing her own capacity for violence. Furthermore, the tiger’s comparison to an eraser is curious. Would Isabel like to make the tiger disappear, to erase it from existence? On the other hand, this eraser-sized tiger could foreshadow how, in the larger world, the tiger will eventually eradicate el Nene. This miniature tiger is clearly a product of Isabel’s imagination, but because the ant farm represents Los Horneros, we are left wondering whether the phantom-like tiger of “el mundo grande” is real or not.

In Isabel’s mind, the ants also reflect Rema and el Nene’s relationship. Twice, Isabel associates ants with el Nene. While lying in bed, she remembers the following scene:

[Rema] le llevaba el café y él que tomaba la taza equivocándose, tan torpe que apretó los dedos de Rema al tomar la taza, Isabel había visto desde el comedor que Rema draba la mano atrás y el Nene salvaba apenas la taza de caerse, y se reía con la confusión. Mejor hormigas negras que coloradas: más grandes, más feroces. (148)

Isabel innocently interprets el Nene’s actions as clumsy errors rather than intentional advances. Nevertheless, her abrupt segue to the ants indicates that she senses something violent. Having already observed el Nene’s behavior, the reader easily understands how Isabel connects him to the ants. Are her thoughts about ferocious

ants a sublimation of her desire to harm el Nene? Does she unconsciously consider him combative like the ants? The notion of conflict continues when Isabel imagines the war that will ensue upon combining red and black ants in the same container: “seguir la guerra detrás del vidrio ... Salvo que no se pelearan. Dos hormigueros, uno en cada esquina de la caja de vidrio ... Pero casi seguro que se pelearían, guerra *sin cuartel* para mirar por los vidrios” (148). Not only does Isabel notice the hostility, but she also seems anxious to incite it. Finally, we must wonder why Isabel recalls this scene. Although she is evidently oblivious to the undertones of what she has seen, she is nonetheless fascinated. Her sensitivity to Rema and el Nene’s relationship continues to sharpen.

—Pamela J. McNab. “Shifting Symbols in Cortázar’s ‘Bestiario.’”  
*Revista Hispánica Moderna* 50, no. 2 (1997): 340–341.

## JULIO RODRÍGUEZ-LUIS ON ALLEGORY

[Julio Rodríguez-Luis is the author of many critical essays on Latin American literature and several editions on Fernán Caballero, Cervantes, and Martí, including *Re-reading José Martí (1853–1895): One Hundred Years Later* (1999). In this excerpt, Professor Rodríguez-Luis suggests some interpretations of “Bestiary,” concluding that allegory is the only likely explanation because of the impossible presence of a tiger as a central element of the tale.]

How is one to interpret this short novella, so effective that it would be sufficient to make the reputation of any writer? The realism of the psychological portraits of the protagonist and the other characters as seen through her eyes does not really work in “Bestiary” against developing an allegorical reading, as it does in “Gates,” where the ghost’s presence is explained in logical terms. The tiger could very well represent the instincts, the animal side of the self, which ends up killing him who lets himself be dominated by the beast inside him (notice how Nene “always knows” where the tiger is, although Isabel avoids asking him). It

could also stand for the forbidden, for that which is to be avoided at all costs. The wild animal is released so that it can fulfill its mission, by the only innocent member of the household besides Nino; and in doing this, she loses her innocence. (Nino, being younger than the protagonist, is further away from the possibility of losing his innocence.)<sup>10</sup> It is highly unusual, however, for an allegorical text—assuming that the preceding interpretation is valid—to be as respectful of psychological verisimilitude as this one is. In fact, “Bestiario” is a masterpiece of a subgenre of psychological fiction which features children as protagonists, and in which Cortázar has produced two other masterpieces, “The Poisons” and “End of the Game,” neither of which contains fantastic elements.

Since the omniscient narrator functions in “Bestiario” to confirm the protagonist’s account of the events, we have no basis for rejecting or even doubting this account by interpreting it as the creation of a neurotic mind. The impossible, that an untamed tiger would live on an estate almost as if it was just another member of the household, must be accepted. From that point of view the story belongs within the impossible accepted category of the fantastic. The fantastic element is here, however, of a particularly concrete nature, much more so than other fantastic intruders in the *Bestiario* stories, some of which remain unseen (“House Taken Over”), or are by definition elusive (the *mancuspías*, or, for different reasons, Alina Reyes’ double). The bunnies of “Letter” are, of course, much more impossible than the tiger, on account of the way they come into the world; but as I argued above, there are clues in that story that definitely suggest that we question their very existence. In “Bestiario,” on the other hand, the tiger that dominates the narrative from the very beginning with its enigmatic presence is seen and dealt with by all the characters. The doubt regarding the impossible which is represented by the protagonist’s withheld questions about the tiger’s presence in the midst of her uncles’ (?) home is never addressed in the story, but instead, forcefully ignored. Consequently, the narrative is able to devote its full attention to

the psychological interplay of the characters, something which, in turn, calls for rejecting the very notion that is central to the story: the existence of the tiger.

An allegorical reading of “Bestiary” seems to be the only possible solution to the basic impossibility of its central element, the tiger in the house. Notice, by the way, that contrary to what happens in medieval and Renaissance examples of the genre, where the allegorical reading rests on many characters and incidents, in this case it is located in only one element of the story, from which it extends to cover all or most of the story’s connotations. In this regard, the specificity of the tiger as the allegorical vehicle is even more marked than that of the bunnies or of the house invaders. Meanwhile, everything in the organization of the narrative, which unfolds as a story about growing up, conspires against our seeing it as allegorical at all.

“Bestiary” brings to a culmination that is also a dead end of sorts the oppositional nature of the relationship between psychological realism and the supernatural that governs the development of plots in the fantastic genre, and that characterizes the stories of *Bestiario*. The fantastic element it introduces is so concrete (to the point of being able to kill someone) that it cannot easily be integrated with the thrust of the story as can other, ghostlike supernatural occurrences (“Gates,” “The Distances”). Its independence from the story in which it exists leaves us no other alternative than to search for an extratextual, i.e., allegorical interpretation of it. But this path, the one that we must eventually follow in so many fantastic narratives, is in turn obstructed once again by the psychological verisimilitude of the description.

#### NOTE

10. Alazraki detects an erotic attraction for Rema on the part of Isabel, so that the tiger points not only to Nene’s desire, but also to the girl’s (*En busca* 175, 178).

—Julio Rodríguez-Luis. “Cortázar’s Approach to the Fantastic.” *The Contemporary Praxis of the Fantastic: Borges and Cortázar*: 69–71, 99. New York: Garland Publishing, 1991.

## JOSEPH TYLER EXAMINES THE FABULOUS AND THE FANTASTIC

[Joseph Tyler edited *Borges' Craft of Fiction: Selected Essays on His Writing* (1992) and *For Borges: A Collection of Critical Essays and Fiction on the Centennial of His Birth (1899–1999)* (1999). In this essay, Tyler cites the presence of tigers in short stories by Borges, Quiroga, Donoso, and Cortázar in order to examine the difference between the fabulous and the fantastic in the short narrative. Here, Tyler outlines the unexplained presence of the tiger at the Funes estate, the personal conflicts in the Funes family that the tiger seems to unite, and compares this tiger to the one in Quiroga's "Juan Darién."]

Somewhat ludicrous, Cortázar's "Bestiary" takes place out in the country in Argentina. The main character, a young middle-class girl named Isabel, is invited to spend her summer vacation at the Funes's country estate. The Funes family enjoys having Isabel because she is a playmate for young Nino Funes. The story line is actually a series of past events being recalled by the narrator, possibly, Isabel. The story revolves around the banality of those events. It is a lengthy description of incidents connected, for the most part, with the activities of the children, Isabel and Nino: stamp collecting, the gathering of insects, and the tending of a formicary. The children also chase butterflies and other not-so-precious insects to fight boredom.

But from the start, we feel the presence of the tiger, an unusual addition to the family that goes unexplained throughout the story. We know of the tiger through allusions to its whereabouts. Because these allusions are wisely inserted within the text, the reader feels compelled to read in between the lines to grasp the presence of the tiger and to understand what that presence represents. I will draw a few examples to illustrate this text within a text. These fragmentary excerpts appear within the text of the short story, but they also are intended to form part of several epistles the young girl, Isabel, sends home from time to time.

The first passing reference to the tiger reads: "Not so on account of the tiger, after all they do take care of that aspect well" (139). On another occasion, Isabel notes: "Everything was more minute, more crystal like and rose-colored, without the tiger then" (142). Later she mentions "the bathroom was located two doors down the hall (but indoors, so that one could find out in advance where the tiger was)" (143). From these comments the reader assumes that the tiger moves indoors, going from room to room undisturbed; but the animal also roams outdoors, for Isabel tells us: "A long while went by until one of the workers notified us that the tiger was in the shamrock garden" (144–45). Finally, the narrator adds, "It was almost always the Steward (the capataz) who would notify them of the whereabouts of the tiger" (155).

Besides the ominous ubiquity of the tiger, there are traces of a series of personal conflicts in the Funes family. Its components are two brothers and a sister: Luis, El Nene, and Rema. The family conflict becomes more evident through the commentary Isabel makes on their behavior. Rema, as a mother figure for the children, has all the positive traits one wants in a person. Luis, being Nino's father, is also good, but appears always to be immersed in his work, oblivious, for the most part, of most that goes on within the estate. El Nene, because of his intolerance and almost violent behavior towards Nino, as well as his odd conduct with Rema, more than qualifies for his role as the villain. In the end, Isabel manages to have complete trust in Don Roberto, the steward, and Nino, and their information on the tiger's whereabouts. Isabel, whom we suspect of having been somewhat deranged at an earlier stage in her life back home, realizes, as we do through Luis's and Rema's exchange, that El Nene's intentions towards Rema are clearly incestuous. Angered by this relationship, Isabel decides to put a stop to El Nene's incestuous behavior by sending him to the library, and eventually to his death, for that is the place presently occupied by the tiger. The tiger's *raison d'être*, though unexplained in the beginning, is justified in the end by the unfair play of Isabel, the self-appointed magistrate.

Again, as we have seen in the story by Quiroga, the tiger, as a force and as predator, has come in from its exotic domain to act



as an element of justice in a so-called “civilized world.” Cortázar’s tale, unlike Quiroga’s, deals not with the fabulous nor with the allegorical symbolism of the tiger, but instead presents a type of problem more characteristically in line with the author’s narrative art. One of Cortázar’s aims, in many of his stories, is to explore the psychological zone of his characters, who to a large extent, are of the clinical type. In the case of “Bestiary,” Cortázar focuses on the protective nature of a child who seeks revenge through the raft of the wild.

—Joseph Tyler. “From the Fabulous to the Fantastic: The Tiger and its Fearful Symmetry in the Twentieth-Century Spanish American Short Story.” *Romance Languages Annual* 9 (1998): 714.

## PLOT SUMMARY OF

# **“Blow-Up”**

In “Blow-Up,” Cortázar challenges the reader from the first paragraph. He questions the appropriate narrative mode and proclaims the impossibility of determining one: “It’ll never be known how this has to be told, in the first person or in the second, using the third person plural or continually inventing modes that will serve for nothing ... What the hell.” (114) To further complicate any grasp the reader might have on the story to come, the first person narrator introduces machines into the narrative mix. Is the Remington typewriter composing the tale? Does the aperture of the Contax 1.1.2 permit the reader to view the events? As if to reassure the reader that this is not the case, the narrator changes abruptly—“So, I have to write”—suggesting that the story will be normal and understandable. Immediately the narrator provides another dose of confusion: “... I who am dead ... and I’m alive, I’m not trying to fool anybody, you’ll see when we get to the moment...” (115).

The three initial paragraphs reveal no character, relate no event, and leave questions unanswered. Just as abruptly, the narrator, repeating that he only ever cares to see clouds, switches styles in the fourth paragraph and provides the reader with reassuring details. The story about to be told concerns taking photos in Paris on Sunday, November 7. The photographer is Roberto Michel, a French-Chilean who is a translator by profession. Despite these details, the narrative voice continues the confusion. In the first person, the narrator begins to describe that day in Paris as a photographer would and then adds: “Michel knew that the photographer always worked as a permutation of his personal way of seeing the world as other than the camera insidiously imposed ... but he lacked confidence in himself...” (117–118). Are the narrator and Michel acquainted through their interests in photography? Or, are Michel and the narrator one and the same?

Cortázar plays with these ambiguities as the first-person narrator explains how he settled himself along a wall on an isle,

perhaps to take some photos. Craftily the narrator shrugs off any desire to take pictures, while at the same time he announces—photographically—the appearance of the prime subject/object in the story: “I think it was that moment when the match was about to touch the tobacco that I saw the young boy for the first time.” (118)

The narrator now begins to recount the events of his tale as if by creating a verbal photograph. He notices that there are actually two people in his views; not a couple, perhaps a mother and her son. The narrator notes too that the boy acts both nervous and shy. The boy’s posture—almost ready for flight—compels the narrator to wonder further what is behind the boy’s behavior.

Here the narrator emphasizes the dimensions of his mental photograph. The couple, a blond woman talking closely to the boy, is but ten feet away. He describes the woman as “thin and willowy” (119) with a “white, bleak face” (120) but judges both characterizations to be “unfair.” His attention shifts to the boy whom he guesses to be about fourteen or fifteen. By observing the boy’s clothes, the narrator invents a series of assumptions about the boy, his family, their home, and his habits. The scene is so engaging that the narrator cannot focus on the clouds as is his habit. “That morning I don’t think I looked at the sky once, because what was happening with the boy and the woman appeared so soon I could do nothing but look at them and wait, look at them and....” (121)

The narrator next indulges himself in imagining the events leading up to the compelling scene. Any boy his age seeing such a woman would consider her marvelous and engage her in some conversation. The thrill might be short-lived or he might stay longer. The woman might touch his face or lead him off. The narrator suspects that his own imaginings are responsible for the “disquieting aura” surrounding the couple, until he notices a man in a car. He realizes that the man and the car had been there all along. At the same time, he sees the woman shift her position so that now the boy stands between her and a wall. The narrator tries to decide whether to take a photo of them or not. As he does, he thinks he witnesses the woman take the offensive: “The

woman was getting on with the job of handcuffing the boy smoothly, stripping from him what was left of his freedom a hair at a time, in an incredibly slow and delicious torture. I imagined the possible endings...." (123)

The narrator's vicarious imagination takes the reader through his version of a denouement between the couple. Again the ambiguity of narrative voice takes over the text. After imagining the boy's seduction, the narrator attests: "Michel is guilty of making literature, of indulging in fabricated unrealities ... But that woman invited speculation, perhaps giving clues enough for the fantasy to hit the bullseye." (124) As a photo of the couple is taken, we find Michel and the narrator converge. While the irritated woman demands the film from the meddling photographer, the boy runs off and disappears. The woman lashes out and curses Michel-narrator. They are only interrupted by the slam of the car door: "It was only at that point that I realized he was playing a part in the comedy." (125) The grimace on the man's face "twisted his mouth askew" (123) and his lips trembled. The narrator detects fear and cowardice in both participants of the boy's seduction; he laughs at them before leaving and does not turn over the film.

Several days later Michel develops the film but shows interest only in the picture of the blond and the boy. He makes several enlargements, one the size of a poster which he tacks to one wall in his room. After a few days of staring at the enlargement, Michel realizes that he has been viewing it at exactly 10 feet away, the same distance of the event and with the same point of view the camera lens had that day. When he stumbles over a difficult passage to translate, Michel takes a break from his work to lose himself again in the memory of that Paris morning. He recalls the details of the woman's anger when photographed. He takes pride in helping the boy to escape, or so he interprets the boy's flight. Speaking again as separate from Michel he comments, "Michel is something of a puritan at times, he believes that one should not seduce someone from a position of strength. In the last analysis, taking that photo had been a good act." (128)

But staring at the blow-up instead of working is not so good. The translation at hand does not hold his attention, as did the

particulars of the blond. Michel mentally reenacts the events as they took place: the woman talking in the boy's ear, her caressing his cheek, the startled boy, and the man in the car. The images take on a new life of their own in his mind. He sees the man leave the car and approach the couple. The man is there to carry out his original sinister plan aided by his willing accomplice.

All at once the order was inverted, they were alive, moving, they were deciding and had decided, they were going to their future; and I on this side, prisoner of another time, in a room on the fifth floor, to not know who they were, that woman, that man, and that boy, to be only the lens of my camera, something fixed, rigid, incapable of intervention. It was horrible, their mocking me, deciding it before my impotent eye, mocking me, for the boy again was looking at the flour-faced clown and I had to accept the fact that he was going to say yes....  
(129–130)

Suddenly screaming, Michel enters the repulsive reenactment. In his vision, Michel sees the boy escape a second time but he cannot bear to envision anymore. Closing his eyes, he cries. When he reopens them, Michel's now cleared vision returns. Once again, he views two clouds in a blue sky.

Note: This story was originally entitled "Las babas del diablo" in Spanish and was collected in *Las armas secretas*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana 1959.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS IN

# “Blow-Up”

Using the first person, the **narrator** tells his story from the perspective of a camera lens. His vision of the world is that of a photographer. The narration he provides is cinemagraphic. He speaks in descriptive moments about the events in his story as if he were remembering each as a separate picture. At the beginning of the story, it is unclear whether the narrator and Michel are the same person or acquaintances.

**Roberto Michel** is narrator’s alter ego; Michel is a translator by profession. He spends his spare time observing clouds and taking photos with his Contax 1.1.2. One Sunday in Paris, he stumbles upon the blond woman taking to the young boy. The enlargement he makes from the photo he takes of them becomes his obsession and the central point of the story.

About fourteen or fifteen, the **young boy** appears to come from a middle class family of some comfort in Paris. He acts shyly in the woman’s company. His shyness gradually displays a nervous body language suggesting the desire to escape. The boy takes advantage of the woman’s altercation with Michel to flee the unnerving encounter.

**The blond woman** is a marvelously attractive woman; she is observed speaking to the young boy in a provocative manner. Her seduction appears to be slow and deliberate. Just as she is about to win the boy over, Michel snaps a photo; an action that angers her and permits the boy to flee.

**The man in the car** is an unnamed man wearing a gray hat. The narrator describes him as having a pale, wrinkled face with trembling lips, trembling as it turns out because Michel has foiled a seduction. Michel calls him a clown because of his sunless face and a coward for the repulsive plan he apparently has practiced before.

## CRITICAL VIEWS ON

# “Blow-Up”

PATRIZIA BITTINI COMPARES THE SHORT STORY  
WITH THE FILM

[Patrizia Bittini, Professor of Italian at Washington University in St. Louis, compares Antonioni's film interpretation with its textual source, Cortázar's original Spanish version of “Blow-Up” entitled “Las babas del diablo.” In the selection from her essay, Bittini notes an important difference between the two protagonists: Cortázar's Michel is both translator and photographer while Antonioni's Thomas is only a photographer. Bittini's belief is that the presence of conflict generated by language is thus absent in the film version of the story.]

Another important distinction between movie and story is that Michel is a translator and a photographer, while Thomas is only a photographer. Michel uses both language and photography as media, while Thomas is concentrated on photography. There is also another difference: Michel's relationship with the medium is problematic from the beginning, while Thomas at the beginning seems very comfortable with it. In the opening page of “Las babas del diablo,” Michel expresses his frustration:

Nunca se sabrá cómo hay que contar esto, si en primera persona o en segunda, usando la tercera del plural o inventando continuamente formas que no servirán de nada. (Cortázar 61)

Michel's anxiety of experimentation may be interpreted as a sense of failure of modernist experimentation. Michel's frustration caused by language is immediately present in the ambiguity of the title. *Las babas del diablo* (the devil's spit) is an expression that refers to a phenomenon visible in the air in the morning. When Cortázar uses this expression to describe how the boy runs away, he explains that the same phenomenon is also called *hilos de la*

*Virgen* (the Virgin's threads). As David Grossvogel says: "The frustration of the author begins with the ambiguity of the word" (50). This emphasis of the title on ambiguity is very important in Cortázar's short story and is unfortunately lost in the English translation of the short story's title: "Blow-Up."

In Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, Thomas is concentrated on the medium of photography and seems very confident at the beginning. It can be said that Thomas lives in symbiosis with his camera. As Erwin Koppen writes: "For Thomas, photography is not only a profession; it is his way of life, his mode of existence" (47). Even in his relationship with women, Thomas seems to need this medium. It is interesting that what may well be the most sensual scene in the movie takes place while he is photographing the top model Veruska (playing herself). Both the photographer and the model mime a sexual intercourse. Thomas even talks in a way that suggests love-making ("Yes, yes, more! More! Give it to me!" etc.). At the end the model lies on the floor and the photographer rests on a couch. They look extremely tired as though they had experienced orgasm. Later, when the mysterious woman that Thomas had met in the park visits him in his studio, Thomas starts observing her as if he were photographing her. He needs to consider her as a model to be photographed in order to know her. [ ... ]

While in *Blow-Up*, the medium of photography creates a simulacrum, an image which bears no relation to any reality, in "Las babas del diablo," the medium is used in a different way as exemplified in the final scenes. In the photo, the woman and the boy start moving, the old man enters the photo. They are mocking Michel; it is impossible for him to control them. Then, in the very end of the short story, Michel can only see aimlessly moving clouds and birds. In "Las babas del diablo," the medium of photography cannot capture reality because reality is elusive and ambiguous. Reality cannot be captured, but it is still there. As it shows that the only thing left to Thomas is a simulacrum, *Blow-Up* reveals its postmodernity by taking to an extreme the short story's sense of ambiguity, and by questioning the existence of reality itself.



—Patrizia Bittini. “Film is Stranger than Fiction: From Cortázar’s ‘Las babas del diablo’ to Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*.” *Romance Languages Annual* 7 (1995): 201, 203.

## MARY ANN CAWS ON SURREALISM AND NARRATIVE VISION

[Mary Ann Caws, Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature at CUNY, has authored, edited, and translated many scholarly books throughout her career, including: *Eye in the text: Essays on Perception, Mannerist to Modern* (1981) and *Manifesto: a Century of Isms* (2000) as well as numerous critical essays on authors including Jabès, Mallarmé, Woolf, and Baudelaire. The premise of Professor Caws’s essay is that surrealism has prepared the reader for contemporary narrators’ use of light and shadows in their poems and texts. In this selection, Professor Caws perceives Cortázar’s narrative vision in light of Rene Magritte’s work entitled *The False Mirror*.]

The celebrated story “Blow-Up,” a close-up study of interference, brings to the eye of the mind Rene Magritte’s canvas called *The False Mirror*, with its clouds and its sight interchangeable, the outside sky superposed upon the seeing orb itself, blocking or clouding the sight and again, looking back at the eye they mirror and reflect upon. The intrusions made in the story upon the vision as it is controlled by the apparatus recording it, free of judgment, are all placed on the same level: a pigeon, two or three sparrows, and a murder, treated with equal importance with the “objectif” of the camera. The camera as arm against neutrality (the “level-zero of passive acceptance”) claims a vivid attention like the surrealists’ valuing of the state of expectation itself; creative of the event. The objective eye selects and heightens events, bringing them to life as they are brought to sight, valueless in themselves and all valuable as facts recorded: “... in all ways when one is walking about with a camera, one has almost a duty to be attentive, to not lose that abrupt and happy

rebound of sun's rays off an old stone, or the pigtails-flying run of a small girl going home with a loaf of bread or a bottle of milk" (EG, p. 116).

In this tale then told through the viewfinder itself, with a tree included to "break up too much grey space," the aesthetic attentiveness and its chance result take precedence over substance, over thought: "I got it all into the viewfinder (with the tree, the railing, the seven o'clock sun) and then took the shot" (EG, p. 124). To "get it all in" is thus to possess it, as with the catalogues in the poems of Apollinaire and the surrealists after him. Later, the enlargement of the photograph in repeated stages works like the gradual enlargement of a surrealist rose in a poem of Desnos, where, as the rose is compared to more and more elements, each is added on to it as the image finally outstrips the poem, growing steadily larger and larger, snowballing down the page after an initial solitude. In the story, the photograph increases with the formal details visible through the eye of the lens, whose focus replaces the "normal" human focus of vision, until the detail becomes the whole, and the eye becomes the lens, "something fixed, rigid, incapable of intervention ... my impotent eye" (EG, p. 130). The replacement of the personal and living by the impersonal and immutable of this move into the picture by the lens is accompanied by the regular rhythmical sway of the branches of the tree—that deliberately selected interruptor placed here, we remember, in order to break up the grey space within the frame of the picture. The regular rhythm calls for its contrary, as attention is suddenly forced upon an irregularity in the object world, the place where the railing is tarnished, and in the human world, upon a desperate close-up into the horror of identity: "The woman's face turned toward me as though surprised, was enlarging, and I turned a bit, I mean that the camera turned a little, and without losing sight of the woman, I began to close in on the man who was looking at me with the black holes he had in place of eyes...", close and closer, increasingly rapid until "the game was played out," and the picture cropped, until only the black tongue of the man occupies the center, and the horrified spectator, who is the narrator, breaks into tears at last.

The Magritte picture of *The False Mirror* returns, as clouds make their way again across the eyes and their own sky, as rain falls over the picture in the final shot with its reversal and its clearing: “like a spell of weeping reversed, and little by little the frame becomes clear, perhaps the sun comes out, and again the clouds begin to come, two at a time, three at a time. And the pigeons once in a while, and a sparrow or two” (EG, p. 131). The reduction of the build-up and the close-up to the sparse accompanies, in a lyric simplicity, the clearing of the sight at just the moment when the emotion of the spectator is transferred to the picture and the focus shifts from inside reaction to outside climate. So the clouding and the clearing, of the sky, the eyes, and the camera lens, all in a mirror at once False in its illogicality and now Real in its traces, permits the drastic enlargement of blow-up not only of the picture but of our parallel perception.

—Mary Ann Caws. “A Slant on Surrealism: Aesthetics as Preparation.” *Proceedings of the Xth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1985: 301–302.

## SEYMOUR CHATMAN ANALYZES NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

[Seymour Chatman, Professor Emeritus of Rhetoric and Film Studies at University of California at Berkeley, has examined the relationship of film and fiction throughout his academic career including *Coming to Terms: the Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (1990) and *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1978). Professor Chatman is also the author of numerous essays on authors such as Henry James and Gerard Genette. The present essay provides a rigorous examination of the first few problematic paragraphs of Cortázar’s short story.

It is not always necessary to consider a story’s discourse to interpret it. But the first five paragraphs of “Blow-Up” explicitly raise questions about how its discourse shall go, that is, how the

story is to be told. Further, the recurring flights of clouds and birds (mostly in parentheses) are couched in the present tense's unlike other story events. Since their time reference is the same as that of the discourse, I must decide whether they occur prior to or contemporary with the moment of narrative telling.

What does "Blow-Up" mean? Is the code military? Engineering? Photographic? The answer seems to clarify in the reference in paragraph two to a "Contax 1.1.2," which I recognize as a very expensive professional camera, whose small format requires the "blowing-up" or enlarging of prints. I am set for further photographic allusions, including metaphoric ones. (For the meaning of the Spanish title, see below, III.)

At the very outset, two questions arise about the discourse: 1) Why does the narrator consciously refer to the process of storytelling (code of discourse: the beginning; choice of pronoun for the narrator)? Why does he have so much difficulty getting going? 2) Who is he (code of discourse: narrator-identity)? What is his situation in the discourse—location, physical and mental condition, and so on—and how does he relate to the story's protagonist? Is he the protagonist (the "Roberto Michel" of paragraph six), or is he someone else? Who is the narratee, that is, to whom is the narrator speaking?

The second question, I feel, can only be answered by the whole narrative. I must await the end before hazarding a guess. The first question, however, seems more immediately negotiable. Why is he engaged in the grammatical struggles (which pronoun to use, and which tense)? Why should he introduce solecisms? The code that first suggests itself to me is that of sophisticated modernist, "self-conscious" fiction. One such code (I think of Robbe-Grillet) would deny the possibility of any coherent reading: contradictions and paradoxes, that code tells me, are introduced precisely to make impossible the kind of piecing out of meanings that the search through the codes and confirmations by context enables. (But that code seems itself delusory: pure incoherence is impossible, because it is the nature of texts, in the act of presenting themselves as such, to utilize codes, even if these are self-contradictory. The reader simply accepts an overriding code of self-contradiction.) Not all self-

conscious texts are self-negating: for example, in John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," the narrator advances clichéd prescriptions about narrative voice, point of view, plot, and so on, apparently to question whether the whole apparatus does not prevent an author from getting to the truth he wishes to express. But Cortázar's narrator seems genuinely confused and torn, or so subsequent statements, I think, suggest. And here we have a first principle of interpretation, namely, to seek out redundancy. For instance, it seems as if he wishes the typewriter to tell the story (paragraph two), to form with him some kind of mechanical collaboration, along with that other machine, the camera (code of technology: the machine; code of psychology: human autonomy). Perhaps he feels inept as a storyteller. Perhaps he is self-effacing. Perhaps indolent (the "bock" he wants to drink). Perhaps perfectionist ("... that would be perfection"). Any answer is premature. The entire narrative, both discourse and story, may be needed to explain his discomfiture. Perhaps, ultimately, I shall have to recognize some overriding code, either psychological (should I conclude that the narrator's situation is unique) or philosophical (should I conclude that it is universal).

Other questions immediately arise. Who is the blond? Is she a character (code of story: character)? Why all the fuss about the clouds (code of story: setting)? Why does the narrator feel *obliged* to tell the story (paragraph two)? Some ostensible answers seem to be offered: "It's of such burning importance to the world" since "One of us all has to write"; then, contradictorily, "I don't know"; finally, "To relieve myself of the tickling in my stomach." Which is it? Or is the real reason none of these? Who are the "we" of paragraph two, and why are they compromised? Who are the "they" of paragraph five that will "replace" him? In what sense is the narrator dead and yet alive? Why does this "death," whatever it is, make him less compromised? Why does he so frequently contradict himself? He is both dead and alive. He claims to be undistracted but the clouds keep distracting him. He begins with *this* period, but it turns into the last one back, and ends by being the one at the beginning. In paragraph two he must tell the story, but in paragraph three he wonders why he

must tell it. He says that nobody knows what he's seeing (including, presumably, himself), yet adds immediately in parentheses that it's the clouds that he is seeing. These are infractions of the code of ordinary narrative logic and consistency. Why do they occur? When shall we find out that he's not trying to fool anybody about claiming to be dead? How can it be that he, the narrator, is of a group who don't know 1) who is telling the story, 2) what actually occurred, 3) what he is seeing now (paragraph four)? What is the something other than clouds that will start coming (paragraph five)? How could telling the story be an answer to the questions raised in paragraphs three through five? I do not argue that these questions are "logical" in some scientific sense. It is just that I have been instructed by the literary tradition to ask them. Culture, not nature, demands that they be answered.

—Seymour Chatman. "The Rhetoric of Difficult Fiction: Cortázar's 'Blow-Up.'" *Poetics Today* 1, no. 4 (1980): 28–30.

## JOHN DITSKY ON IMAGES OF THE UNIVERSE

[John Ditsky has published extensively on writers including Paul Bowles, Alice Munro, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck, including *Critical Essays on Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath* (1989) and *John Steinbeck and the Critics* (2000). In this essay, Professor Ditsky summarizes the short fiction of Cortázar. This excerpt quickly points out Ditsky's views on "Blow-Up": it is the protagonist's effort to capture an image of his association with the universe.]

As is obvious in Antonioni's choice of it as a pretext for his film of the same name, "Blow-up" is one of Cortázar's most ambitious and complex—or densely written—excursions into Borgesian notions of relativity. Michel, his protagonist, is in the business of data-transference; he is by profession a translator, by avocation a photographer. And yet he searches constantly for the right means

of telling his story (114), seems to feel both dead and alive (115), and knows that “the photographer always worked as a permutation of his personal way of seeing the world as other than the camera insidiously imposed upon it” (117–18). Yet he is also conscious of the stream of images which he stands in—noting as he does, Hamlet-like, the changing shapes of clouds throughout the story, but being able to let himself “go in the letting go of objects, running immobile in the stream of time” (118). His random searching for images with inherent meaning is handled with suspicion, because Michel knows that “looking oozes with mendacity, because it’s that which expels us furthest outside ourselves” (119). When he sees a woman and young man in a public place and takes their picture, he is able to invent a scenario for the coupling of characters (120–22), but the discovery of a third character distorts his imaginings—he is guilty of “making literature” (124). Yet Michel is constantly distracted by the wind in the leaves, and his sentences go on and on, as if uncertain of their own proper phrasings. An especially interesting moment is the one when Michel becomes aware of the blond woman’s eyes—having already rejected his own trial descriptions of her as “unfair”; her eyes, he suggests, fall upon objects “like two eagles, two leaps into nothingness, two puffs of green slime.” Rejecting mere description in behalf of understanding, he repeats, “And I said two puffs of green slime” (120). The point of all this is not, in fact, the appropriateness of an image which is echoed elsewhere in the story; it is Michel’s stated intent to fix an image—a “meaning”—by force of personal fiat, too work his associations upon the universe. (One thinks of William Carlos Williams’ insistent ending to “Portrait of a Lady”: “I said petals from an appletree.”) Their achieved image, itself redolent of its own set of associations, now comes to play itself out for Michel “all at once” (128–29); the scene he has ostensibly interrupted now completes itself before his hypnotized gaze. Like the speaker and like Mauro in “The Gates of Heaven,” Michel finds himself “on this side, prisoner of another time” (130). And like the Kid in “Bestiary,” his encounter with obsessiveness ends with a scream, as he acknowledges the autonomy of the supposedly

“frozen” image (130). The scene incipient in the image on Michel’s film plays itself out nevertheless—has its way with Michel—and leaves behind it an empty surface where had been the blow-up of the original “captured” moment. Michel is left with the grey blotches of clouds, pigeons, and raindrops. The creative imagination at work in the most suspect of art forms—the one in which the “creator” seems to count for least—is in the end exhausted by the potentialities of his supposedly subject observances.

—John Ditsky. “End of the Game: The Early Fictions of Julio Cortázar.” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3, no. 3 (1983): 44.

#### DAVID I. GROSSVOGEL ON CORTÁZAR AND ANTONIONI

[Professor Emeritus of French at Cornell University, David I. Grossvogel is the author of *Didn’t You Used To Be Depardieu: Film as Cultural Marker in France and Hollywood* (2002) and *Limits of the Novel: Evolutions of a Form from Chaucer to Robbe-Grillet* (1968). He has contributed scholarly essays on a wide range of authors such as Boccaccio, Nerval, Buñuel, and Polansky. In this article, originally appearing in *Diacritics* (1972), Professor Grossvogel adds another observation on the Cortázar-Antonioni relationship in which he suggests that the only shared element is the initial premise of “absolute possession through the art form.”]

Antonioni is likewise an analyst rather than a translator: he needed Cortázar in order to explain their differences—once their common esthetic quandary had been stated. Cortázar’s Michel is an amateur photographer because, for Cortázar, photography is an analogue for the translating word. Antonioni, concerned essentially with the visual statement, knows that the analogue is hasty. Instead, his hero is a professional photographer, a cool product of London’s youth and mod cultures—for reasons that have little to do with either London or culture: each protagonist



is a maker of art forms and each evidences a similar need to possess the world around him through the form he constructs. Thomas has fewer metaphysical questions and, at first, fewer anxieties because he is seen in his former life while Michel is a troubled voice that addresses the reader *after* the event. Also, Thomas does not use words: his world has always been his instantly, through his view-finder. When, in the course of this effortless world-appropriation, each hero is involved in a drama that is too intense for such automatic assimilation, the first reaction of each is identical—and identically wrong. Each believes that his appropriative control persists: on the basis of inadequate evidence, each believes that he has saved a human life. And each must slowly lose his self-assurance through the progressively more urgent questioning of an art object that has now become irremediably *separate* from its maker.

In fact, the two analyses are as different as the different modes that are being analyzed: only the initial posit of absolute possession through the art form, and the failure of that absolute endeavor, are identical. Not having experienced the ambiguous world of words, Thomas is a less complex character than Michel. He is simply his camera: his eye is its lens, his life-rhythm (disjunctive, episodic, made of instants that are neither judged nor related to any other) is the rhythm of his picture taking;<sup>2</sup> it is significant that the only sexual encounter which he follows through to its climax is the one he shares with the model he is photographing. (His attempted intercourse with Jane aborts: it is only prior to their going to bed, when he sees her as a photographer's model, that he is actually *with* her.) His intrusion upon the park scene is not his but his camera's and he will first turn to his camera for the answers to his questions.

#### NOTE

2. Leading socially-conscious critics to logical developments about the hero's alienation in a mercantile world.

—David L. Grossvogel. "Blow-Up: The Forms of an Esthetic Itinerary." *Critical Essays on Julio Cortázar*, edited by Jaime Alazraki. New York: G. K. Hall, 1999: 148, 154.

## FREDERICK LUCIANI EXAMINES “BLOW-UP” AND HITCHCOCK’S REAR WINDOW

[Frederick Luciani, Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at Colgate University, has written extensively on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as well as the Spanish American theater. In this essay, Professor Luciani examines Cortázar’s “Blow-Up” in relation to the film works of Hitchcock, Zapruder, De Palma, Coppola, and Stone. This excerpt presents a fundamental comparison by Luciani of the narrative realism in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* and Cortázar’s “surrealist inclinations.”]

Cortázar’s story is narrated by an amateur photographer (Roberto Michel) who thwarts the apparent seduction of an adolescent by an older woman by taking their picture, only later to reinterpret the nature of the “crime.” The intended agent of the seduction, he believes, is a man sitting in a car, visible in the photograph’s background. Michel reaches this conclusion after examining blowups of the photograph and witnessing an apparently hallucinatory animation of those photographic images in a movielike sequence.

The elements of “Blow-Up” that have been mentioned above as congruent with Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* are also among the most critically commented upon: the question of moral responsibility, the phenomenon of the voyeur, the problematic sexuality of the protagonist, narrative self-reflexivity, and the story’s complex structure with its intersecting planes of narrative space, time, and reality. Critics often note, as well, Cortázar’s fictional self-inscription in the story: like Cortázar, Roberto Michel is a professional translator, amateur photographer, and a Parisian of (partial) Latin American origin; moreover, in his highly self-conscious role as narrator he is quintessentially a writer.<sup>7</sup>

However, Cortázar’s departures from Hitchcock’s precedent—a precedent, it is worth repeating, that cannot be posited as a

direct influence—are what he will bequeath to Antonioni and his Hollywood successors. Those departures, in sum, can be characterized as a kind of staged surrender of semantic control. For example, Cortázar's story takes the search for truth beyond the conventions of mystery narrative and explicitly thematizes it as an unsolvable existential and artistic question. Photography (the “lie” of the captured moment) and film (the “lie” of sequential narrative) serve as emblems for the mendacity of written narrative—indeed, for all forms of mimetic art—and, ultimately, for the breakdown of all ontological quests.

Far from Hitchcock's narrative realism, which is tightly controlled even when he most cleverly plays with space and perspective, Cortázar indulges his surrealist inclinations, especially in the story's final, hallucinatory sequences. The surreal in “Blow-Up” is inseparable from the narrator's aberrant psychological state: The story is the narrative enactment of a mental breakdown, one that is motivated by an apparently fragile psychosexual past, by the solitude in which the narrator exists (unlike Hitchcock's Jefferies, who shares his anxious search with others), by the uncontrolled proliferation of meaning to which the narrator's interpretative quest leads him, and by the sense of permanent and irremediable victimization, within an alien moral framework, which that failed quest engenders. In Roberto Michel's feverish reflections on the autonomy and distorting power of machines (cameras, typewriters, automobiles) there is also a hint of “techno-anxiety”—a theme that will become prominent in De Palma, Coppola, Stone, and other American directors of their generation.

#### NOTE

7. The Cortázar bibliography is so vast that to attempt to choose the most significant critical pieces on these standard themes is next to impossible. However, the articles by Matas, Gutiérrez, Chatman, Schiminovich, López de Martínez, and Pérez can serve as representative samples.

—Frederick Luciani. “The Man in the Car/ in the Trees/ behind the Fence: From Cortázar's ‘Blow-Up’ to Oliver Stone's JFK.” *Julio Cortázar: New Readings*, edited by Carlos J. Alonso. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 186–187, 204.

## PLOT SUMMARY OF “End of the Game”

In “End of the Game,” three young girls—Letitia, Holanda, and the narrator—spend their afternoons plotting how to escape household chores and the scrutiny of Mama and Aunt Ruth:

The whole point was to get Troy burning, and in the confusion, crowned by a splendid G-flat from Aunt Ruth and Mama’s spring for the whipstick, Holanda and I would take no time at all to get lost in the long porch, toward the empty rooms off the back, where Letitia would be waiting for us, reading Ponson de Terrail, or some other equally inexplicable book. (136)

Their destination is a spot along the Argentine Central railroad tracks just behind their house. They consider this gravel-laden space their kingdom. It has an embankment which gives a view of the crossties and the double line of track. In the head of the afternoon sun, they imagine that the nearby rubble is not just a mineral mix of granite but rather sparkling diamonds. They compete in the heat to measure the perspiration on the others’ faces. Some willow trees provide a shady area which the girls use as the “capital city of the kingdom, the wilderness city and the headquarters of our game.” (137)

The reader learns that Letitia receives special treatment from the adults for some reason. She has no chores to perform, a room of her own, and time to read or relax. One assumes the treatment is a result of Letitia’s being older. The unnamed narrator’s description reveals physical differences as well: “....but Letitia was scragglier than we were, and even worse, that kind of skinniness you can see from a distance in the neck and ears. Maybe it was the stiffness of her back ... she was like a folded-up ironing board” (138) Nevertheless, she is the recognized leader of the group and the director of their game.

The game consists of the same elements each day but its

execution can change at the whim of each girl. The winner, chosen by drawing lots, selects from one of two forms the game takes on: "Statues" or "Attitudes." The contents of an ornament box, kept under the trees, are used to set the rules of the game for the day. The narrator explains that Attitudes depends less on the ornaments than on expressiveness. The virtues or vices they select to portray during Attitudes depends on making angelic faces (Charity), for example, or showing teeth (Envy). Statues, on the other hand, requires ornaments. The other two girls concentrate on fitting the ornaments on the winner. The girl then invents her statue based on how she is dressed. All of these preparations are directed not at the attention of each other but rather at the passengers on the afternoon trains:

The rules were that the winner had to station herself at the foot of the embankment, leaving the shade of the willow trees, and wait for the train ... We hardly saw the people in the train windows, but with time, we got a bit more expert, and we knew that some of the passengers were expecting to see us. (140)

It was a Wednesday afternoon that someone throws a note from the train and thus changes the direction of their game. The note reads: "The statues very pretty. I ride in the third window of the second coach. Ariel B." (140) The narrator wins the toss to keep the note but Letitia wins the next day and chooses Statues. The narrator now reveals that Letitia's "paralysis" is not noticeable and her Statues were always the best. That next afternoon the two girls choose Letitia's ornaments well. Even though her performance is magnificent, the other two girls have the chance to notice "a boy with blond curly hair and light eyes, who smiled brightly when he saw that Holanda and I were waving at him." (141) The next day Ariel sticks his head out of the train window and waves. The performances by Holanda and the narrator fill the next week of afternoons. When a third note arrives, it announced Ariel's preference for Letitia. She keeps the note and appears happier than usual as the three girls return home.

Envy of Letitia fills the hearts of the two others that night,

despite their understanding of her special status due to her physical defect. That same night, the narrator has a recurring nightmare involving trains running over her. All the bad feelings are forgotten in the morning when they notice that Letitia is in more pain than usual. Later that afternoon, although the narrator wins the toss, she gives the advantage to Letitia to perform Statues. The girls' emotional evolution slowly becomes apparent. The narrator notes the manner in which Ariel gazes at Letitia and her satisfaction at being so observed.

Ariel's fourth note flies out of the train the next day and announces his intentions to get off the train to chat with the girls. All three become uncharacteristically quiet. The reader is privy to their concerns: either they will be discovered and prevented from making the rendezvous or something strange has happened to them to provoke such silence. Their curious behavior continues that evening. Mama comments on it and both she and Aunt Ruth suspect evil doings. Letitia, with Holanda's assistance, retreats to the quiet of her room on the pretext of reading a new book. Holanda returns later and when the coast is clear confides to the narrator: "She doesn't want to go tomorrow. She wrote a letter and said that if he asks a lot of questions we should give it to him." (145)

Letitia's seclusion persists the next day. The young narrator tries in vain to convince her to join in the game as usual. When she and Holanda head towards the tracks, they focus not on the recent peculiar behaviors, but on all the things they should say to Ariel to impress him. When he arrives finally, Ariel appears taller than they expected. The narrator notes that he is dressed in grey. She does not remember the details of the girls' side of the conversation, but mentions that just as Ariel is shy the girls were uneasy. Ariel looks through the ornaments with care as they talk and identify the ones that Letitia had worn. Finally, as the conversation lags, Holanda gives him the lilac envelope containing Letitia's letter. Ariel blushes, puts it in his jacket pocket, and makes a very polite but quick departure.

Later, the two girls recount all the details to Letitia but all three girls are uncomfortable. Letitia wavers between happiness and tears as the narrator wonders about the contents of the letter: "... and I would have liked to have asked her what she had said

in the letter, but I don't know what, it was because she'd sealed the envelope before giving it to Holanda, so I didn't say anything about that and only told her what Ariel was like and how many times he'd asked for her." (147) That same night, Holanda predicts the end of their game. Not quite though. Letitia signals to them after lunch the next day as usual. When they find her waiting for them, the girls discover that Letitia had come prepared for a spectacular performance of Statues. She had come with Mama's and Aunt Ruth's best jewelry. The girls witness Letitia's most regal Statue ever and watched as Ariel notices only Letitia as the train passed:

I don't know why, the two of us started running at the same time to catch Letitia who was standing there, still with her eyes closed and enormous tears all down her face. She pushed us back, not angrily, but we helped her stuff the jewels in her pocket, and she went back to the house alone while we put the ornaments away in their box for the last time. (148–149)

As if to make sure, Holanda and the narrator go to the tracks the following day to watch the train go by. As feared and expected, Ariel's place at the third window is empty.

Note: "Final del juego" is the original Spanish name for both the story and the collection, published first in Mexico by Los Presentes in 1956 and then in an expanded edition by Sudamericana in Buenos Aires in 1964.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS IN

### “End of the Game”

**The narrator** is the unnamed sister of three, recounting the game she and her sisters played each afternoon in their secret hideaway next to the train tracks. She observes and describes the rite of passage Letitia experiences as first knowledge of and then contact with Ariel change Letitia’s life.

Perhaps the oldest of the three, **Letitia** suffers from a physical deformity. Because of this, Letitia has no household duties and spends time relaxing and reading in her own room. The stiffness resulting from her defect permits her to perform the Statues phase of their game with distinction.

**Holanda**, the third sister, assists in the plots to escape the house. Letitia entrusts her letter for Ariel to her on the day before their last game.

**Ariel B.** is the high school boy who observes the girls from the train, focusing his attention on Letitia and the Statues she invents. At first Ariel throws the girls notes from the train until one day he arranges to meet them.

Unwittingly at the mercy of the girls, **Mama** and **Aunt Ruth** are the victims of the girls’ conspiracies invented to allow escape from chores and the confines of the house.



## CRITICAL VIEWS ON “End of the Game”

### JOHN DITSKY ON CHILDHOOD GAMES

[John Ditsky is the author of *Critical Essays on Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath* (1989) and *John Steinbeck and the critics* (2000) and has published widely on writers including Paul Bowles, Alice Munro, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck. This short excerpt on the title story of the original collection *Final del juego (End of the Game)* describes the game played by three girls along the railroad tracks in Buenos Aires.]

The book's third section begins with the volume's title story, "End of the Game." We are concerned here with a trio of children who have established a kind of static theatre of poses and expressions for the benefit of passengers passing by their house by rail. Here Cortázar is at his most elusive: one of the children, Letitia, older and brighter than the rest, is also very ill. Their "game" attracts the attention of one of the passengers, who calls himself "Ariel" and sends a note expressing the wish to meet Letitia. But Letitia does not appear at the arranged meeting, and sends instead a note, the contents of which we never learn. She does, however, provide a last spectacle, one involving both regal bearing and also great physical strain. If it is indeed a pose of renunciation, is it based on what she may have told the boy about her condition? Or did she react according to her class in rejecting a boy who goes, not to the presumably exclusive English school, but to an ordinary trade school? Or has she—a combination of both of the above—used the excuse of class to obscure the real reason she severs their remote relationship? Whatever the answer, Cortázar deliberately blurs the reader's perceptions by again limiting them to what a child might observe. In effect, the collection's title story is one of its most intriguing puzzles! Why "Ariel," of all names, for instance—unless to underscore the hapless physicality of Letitia's condition? We shall not know: the

obsessional consciousness breaks off its contact before projection can occur.

—John Ditsky. “End of the Game: The Early Fictions of Julio Cortázar.” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3 (1983): 44–45.

## PETER STANDISH ON CHILDREN’S WORLDVIEW

[The author of *Linea y color: desde la pintura a la poesia* (1999) and editor of several collections of critical essays including *Structures of Power: Essays on Twentieth-Century Spanish-American Fiction* (1996), Peter Standish has also published many academic articles on Cortázar, Borges, and Vargas Llosa. In this excerpt, Cortázar’s interests in insects and his emphasis in the texts on children’s worldview and their passage into adulthood, as seen in “End of the Game.”]

In many stories, then, including “Bestiario” and “En nombre de Bobby” (In the name of Bobby), the child’s worldview is contrasted with the adult’s. In a good number of them, however, the focus is on growing up. An early example is “Los venenos,” a highly autobiographical story, which portrays an idyllic world of children playing in a garden; they are fascinated by a piece of fumigating apparatus brought by an uncle to put an end to an infestation of ants. The story also deals with first feelings of love: there is poison to harm the ants and poison to hurt the feelings of the child narrator. Beyond the ramifications of its title, “Los venenos” is a remarkably realistic and straightforward story; it is also an engaging and accomplished evocation of the edenic world of the children and the sensibilities of the child narrator. The interest in insects is typical of Cortázar; he sees spiders as weavers of destinies, associates rigidity and conformity with beetles, and hostility with ants. In some autobiographical passages in *Territorios* there are powerful evocations of lost innocence, of a lost sense of wonder (see, especially, “Las grandes transparencias” [Large-scale transparencies]), and in that same book (44) mankind is pictured fighting for liberty against the “horminids” (*hormiga* is “ant” in Spanish).

“Final del juego” (End of the game), the title story of that collection, is perhaps the most indicative of how Cortázar regards the passage from childhood to adulthood. It is about three sisters who play “statues” on an embankment for the benefit of a boy they see speeding by periodically in a train. They dub him “Ariel” (Cortázar’s allusion to Shakespeare’s sprite). Ariel drops a note telling the girls how much he enjoys the show and saying that he is most intrigued by one whose name is Leticia. But she is handicapped, and there comes a time when the truth about her condition must be revealed in a note that is passed to Ariel. In these new circumstances Leticia, who is likened by the author to a trapped insect, poses for him one last time. Thus the game is put away, the facts of life are faced, and the handicapped Leticia (whose name means “Joy”) is left in tears. And so it turns out that her name has been ironically chosen: the description of her early in the story as “the happiest of the three of us, and the most privileged” (394) proves to be the opposite of the truth.

—Peter Standish. “Winning by a Knockout: The Stories.” *Understanding Julio Cortázar*: 37. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001.

## ILAN STAVANS ON RITES OF PASSAGE

[The editor of numerous critical works including the *Oxford Book of Latin American Essays* (1997) and the author of many others, among these *Art and Anger: Essays on Politics and the Imagination* (1996), Ilan Stavans is the Lewis-Sebring Professor in Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College. In this excerpt on Cortázar’s short fiction, Professor Stavans focuses on the childhood games that appear in many stories; in “End of the Game” the games of the three girls represent an adolescent rite of passage especially for young Letitia.]

First and foremost, they investigate the nature of childish games behind which a philosophical approach to life is hidden. The

playful (in his own Spanish wording, *lo lúdico*) provides a constant theme throughout Cortázar's work, a sense of play offering an elaborate set of rules controlling human behavior. The approach, of course, extends to adulthood and often takes serious overtones. What the Argentine is suggesting is that behind our daily routine, behind what we call reality, another universe, richer yet chaotic, seductive yet fabulous, lies hidden ready to be seized. His objective is to invite the reader to unveil what at first sight looks like the quotidian: a trivial laughingstock, a childish stratagem. In an interview in *Revista de la Universidad de México* Cortázar said, "In my case, the suspicion of another dimension of things, more secret and less communicable, and the fecund discovery of Alfred Jarry, for whom the true study of reality did not depend on the knowledge of its laws, but in the exception to such laws, have been some of the directing principles in my personal search for a literature at the margin of every naïve realism."<sup>35</sup> He did not populate his stories with fringe people—drunks, adulterers, unemployed and disturbed populace; and his style never relied on simplicity nor purported to be straightforward and functional. Anton Chekhov was his antimodel: the Russian's indirect, understated literary form, his affinity for understanding social and psychological types, was at the other extreme of Cortázar's artistic method; not routine but exception was the Argentine's theme, not realism but surrealism.

Take, for example, the charming "End of the Game." The story is about Letitia, Holanda, and the female narrator, three young girls who enjoy playing a ludicrous game. They go to the train tracks nearby, called the Argentine central tracks, and whenever a train passes, they turn themselves into funny human statues:

Our kingdom was this: a long curve of the tracks ended its bend just opposite the back section of the house. There was just the gravel incline, the cross ties, and the double line of track; some dumb sparse grass among the rubble where mica, quartz and feldspar—the components of granite—sparkled like real diamonds in the two o'clock afternoon sun. When we stooped down

to touch the rails (not wasting time because it would have been dangerous to spend much time there, not so much for the trains as for fear of being seen from the house), the heat off the stone roadbed flushed our faces, and facing into the wind from the river there was a damp heat against our cheeks and ears.

And the narration continues:

Letitia was the first to start the game; she was the luckiest and the most privileged of the three of us. Letitia didn't have to dry dishes or make the beds, she could laze away the day reading or pasting up pictures, and at night they let her stay later if she asked to, not counting having a room to herself, special hot bath when she wanted it, and all kinds of other advantages. Little by little she had taken more advantages of these privileges, and had been presiding over the game since the summer before. I think really she was presiding over the whole kingdom. (*Blow-Up*, 137–38)

After a while Ariel, a man on the train, throws a message to them on a small piece of paper. Probably traveling back and forth to an English school in a Buenos Aires province, he has been watching their statues and would love to meet them. Hence, next time around he will descend at the nearest stop. The three girls get immensely excited—Prince Charming is to greet them and perhaps chose the prettiest among them. But the excitement soon turns to angst and then hysteria. Letitia refuses to be at the tracks when Ariel comes, and the other two, nervous, realize he is stupid once they meet him. What's extraordinary is the way in which the whole experience is narrated as an adolescent rite of passage—a game of life and death. The girls discover another dimension to their existence in a trivial playground and with it love, intrigue, and disappointment.

—Ilan Stavans. "Mutability" in *Julio Cortázar: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1996: 32–34.

PLOT SUMMARY OF

## **“The Night Face Up”**

As in “Axolotl,” Cortázar plays with narrative identities in “The Night Face Up.” When the story begins, the unnamed protagonist, thinking that he is late (the reader never knows for what), hurries to his motorcycle. The pace of the text is quick. Soon the motorcyclist is passing stores, ministries, and long tree-lined streets. He takes in the agreeable surroundings as they go by, but this pleasure soon becomes distraction. Without realizing it, the motorcyclist has no time to prevent the accident that leaves him unconscious on the road.

Some men in the vicinity pull the motorcyclist into a nearby pharmacy to wait for an ambulance. They reassure him that the woman who caused the accident got away relatively unharmed. The motorcyclist is relieved as the ambulance attendant lays him flat on the stretcher. He is in pain and can taste blood near his lips; still he considers himself lucky. Nausea comes and goes as the protagonist receives treatment in the hospital. The smells there consumes him. The reader sees the motorcyclist, now patient, moved from one area to another, always prone and always touched or observed by someone physically over or behind him.

It is the smell that takes the protagonist from one state to another. Apparently after surgery to repair his arm, the patient dreams of odors, these emanating from swamps. He finds himself running in an area, escaping from Aztecs on a ritual manhunt. (The naming here of Aztecs forms another peculiar link between this story and “Axolotl.”) Odors and darkness predominate as the protagonist—identified to the reader as a member of the Motecas, an opposing tribe—stumbles through his dream and the bog. He takes few and cautious steps: “On the path and in darkness, he took his bearings. Then he caught a horrible blast of that foul smell he was most afraid of, and leaped forward desperately.” (70)

Both the reader and the protagonist are startled by the words of the patient in the next bed: “You’re going to fall off the bed ...

Stop bouncing around, old buddy.” (70) The radical shift in space—from swamp to hospital—is accompanied by a change in lighting (the afternoon sun) and the people nearby (a blond nurse, a young intern, his fellow patient). Instead of the forbidding odors of the swamp, the welcoming smell of broth soothes the patient. As night falls, his pain has diminished and the taste of the broth lingers on his lips. He permits himself to drift off to sleep.

Abruptly the patient becomes the hunted warrior once again. Here the footnote at the beginning of Paul Blackburn’s translation of the text begins to take on weight. The Aztecs are engaged in the war of the blossom in which they capture warriors from other tribes for human sacrifice. The mud and the darkness are intolerable sensations for the Moteca. He prays to this tribal Goddess. The warrior knows that it is a question of time. He will remain a target until the consecrated time of the war elapses.

Cries break the silence surrounding him. The warrior leaps up, knife at the ready. He is able to thrust it into the chest of his first attacker but to no avail. The Moteca is taken prisoner as the patient awakes, once again, to hear the words of his fellow patient. Again smells, sounds, and diffused light in the hospital replace the torment of his nightmare. His fever has subsided. The patient tries to get his bearings and attempts to fill in the gap left in his memory by the accident. He does remember his relief at being lifted up from the road and lying stretched out in pain. Relief comes from his surroundings—a soft pillow, cool water and a dim light—as he falls back into a deep sleep.

In the darkness of his dream, the Moteca cannot get his bearings but does feel the confinement of the ropes staking him out face up on the ground. His protective amulet is gone; desperation fills his thoughts. The Moteca hears piercing screams and realizes they are his own. He fights against his bindings and feels the pain of the cords cutting his flesh as he struggles. The darkness is broken by the smell and the light of torches carried by Aztec acolytes. As they carry him—face up—out of the underground cell, the Moteca knows that when he sees the star lit sky his end is near.

The final abrupt and mystifying shift finds the patient staring

at the ceiling of his hospital room. He sees the water bottle on the night table and takes comfort in the thought that the night nurse will come if he rings. Yet his drowsiness takes over. He sees the dark passage go by, rock by rock. The acolytes straighten up as they walk out into the evening air. They peer down at a man lying face up desperately opening and closing his eyes. With his eyes open, the Moteca sees the bonfires and the bloodied sacrificial stone. With them closed, the patient feels his bed supporting him, yet the smell of death forces his eyes to reopen to see the executioner poised above him. Cortázar leaves the Moteca-motorcyclist in the in-between state of dreaming and waking:

He managed to close his eyelids again, although he knew now he was not going to wake up, that he was awake, that the marvelous dream had been the other, absurd as all dreams are—a dream in which he was going through the strange avenues of an astonishing city, with green and red lights that burned without fire or smoke, on an enormous metal insect that whirled away between his legs. In the infinite lie of the dream, they had also picked him up off the ground, someone had approached him also with a knife in his hand, approached him who was lying face up, face up with his eyes closed between the bonfires on the steps. (76)

Note: This story's original Spanish title is "La noche boca arriba." It appeared in the collection of stories entitled *Final del juego* and was translated by Paul Blackburn



LIST OF CHARACTERS IN

## “The Night Face Up”

The **Motorcyclist** is the unnamed protagonist who suffers an accident and finds himself hospitalized. Whether because of a fever or his injuries, the man falls in and out of sleep and the same nightmare while in the hospital. The reader knows little of his identity; no age or physical characteristics are provided.

**Moteca** is the motorcyclist’s alter ego, a warrior caught up in the Aztecs’ war of the blossom. He seems knowledgeable about survival techniques. He prays the supplication of the corn and to the Goddess of Moteca as he evades eventual capture by the Aztecs. Once imprisoned, the Moteca’s posture mimics that of the motorcyclist-patient: he lays face up, awaiting his end.

CRITICAL VIEWS ON  
“The Night Face Up”

JAIME ALAZRAKI ON CHALLENGING CAUSALITY

[Jaime Alazraki, Professor of Spanish at Columbia University, is the author of many fundamental scholarly works on Borges including *Borges and the Kabbalah: and other Essays on his Fiction and Poetry* (1988) and has edited collections of critical essays on Borges and Cortázar. In this essay, originally published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (Fall 1983), Alazraki points out that there is nothing especially disturbing about either one of the story lines in “Bestiary.” Rather, the uncanny and unusual “challenge causality” as Cortázar weaves one story as a dream inside the other and then reverses the process.]

In “Axolotl,” the narrator’s vision of the axolotl overlaps the axolotl’s vision of the narrator. “End of the Game” has also this contrapuntal quality: the perception three girls have of an outsider collides with the outsider’s perception of the three girls. This technique attains to virtuosity in “The Night Face Up” where the story of a motorcycle accident interlocks with the story of a Moteca Indian sacrificed by the Aztecs.

If there is a fantastic side to these stories, it does not depend on any fantastic event, but rather on the way the two stories or points of view have been amalgamated. There is nothing uncanny or particularly disturbing in each of the two stories if they are taken separately. But by coupling them in one single narrative where one bears a close adjacency with the other, the two stories can generate a meaning absent in each of the two individually. It goes without saying that braiding the two stories is not a haphazard or mechanical operation. It is precisely in this interweaving where Cortázar’s art lies. By creating a net of intrinsic interrelations between the two stories, he has forced them to say something denied to each one in isolation. There is

nothing appealing or appalling in the story of a motorcyclist having an accident, being rushed to a hospital, and undergoing surgery. Nor is there anything unusual in the second story of a Moteca Indian fleeing hunting Aztecs during the “war of the blossom” and brought finally to a pyramid’s altar to be sacrificed. Both stories are narrated in that compelling and liquid style that has become Cortázar’s trademark, but what makes the story a narrative feat is the masterful articulation of the two stories in a single structure. By cunningly presenting the second story as a dream of the character in the first story, and by gradually reversing the condition of dream from the second to the first character, this short story achieves a magic that challenges causality. Its impact lies somewhere between the two stories: in that space or interstice that their interlacing has created. The fantastic aura that the story may have stems from that point of intersection where one tale is cleverly linked with the other: what was a dream becomes reality and what was reality becomes a dream. For the motorcyclist, the sacrificed Indian is a dream caused by his own delirium after the accident; for the Moteca Indian, the motorcyclist and his accident in a Paris street is a dream caused by his own delirium before the Aztec priest lowers his arm with a stone knife in his hand to open his chest. We readers shall never know who is the dream and who is the dreamer. There is here a reverberation of that old piece of wisdom uttered by Shakespeare—“Life is a dream.” There is also an echo of that dilemma that has troubled generations of Chinese readers: Was it Chuang Tzu who dreamed that he was a butterfly or was he a butterfly dreaming that it was Chuang Tzu? A third reading points to the confrontation of two civilizations, one attempting to understand the other, one unfailingly appearing as a dream of the other. Jacques Soustelle expressed this idea in a lapidary and intense sentence: “The reality of one civilization is the dream of another.” These interpretations and many others constitute a multiplicity of meanings embodied in the story and underline its nature of metaphor capable of manifold tenors. If in the previous collection only the fantastic event bears the metaphorical weight, in *End of the Game* the entire story has become, by virtue of its narrative organization, a metaphor.

Cortázar has moved from reliance on fantastic events interpolated in the plots in *Bestiary*, to situations that depend no longer on *what happens* at the level of plot but on *how* the story has been structured in this second collection. In the first case, he resorted to a fantastic resolution; in the second, to a compositional solution. The second choice required, beyond any doubt, a greater skill in the handling of the genre.

—Jaime Alazraki. “From Bestiary to Glenda: Pushing the Short Story to its Limits.” *Critical Essays on Julio Cortázar*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1999: 136–137.

#### ANA MARÍA AMAR SÁNCHEZ COMPARES CARPENTIER AND CORTÁZAR

[Ana María Amar Sánchez, Associate Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard University, is the author of *Juegos de seducción y traición: literatura y cultura de masas* (2000) as well as extensive critical essays on Gaucho and testimonial literature. Amar Sánchez considers here “passages from one world to the next” as seen, for example, in Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*). Amar Sánchez believes that Cortázar’s story “The Night Face Up” clearly exposes these dangerous passages and parallels the search for an escape plan as seen in Carpentier’s novel.]

As mentioned earlier, the central locale of *Los pasos perdidos*, the tavern “Memories of the Future,” points the way for us to connect Cortázar’s stories with the group of texts considered here. The name of the tavern could well be that of “La noche boca arriba,” to the extent that it takes the classical Cortázarian dichotomy and transforms it into a temporal as well as a spatial one. In an Aztec past—that of the *guerra florida*—someone belonging to a nonexistent indigenous group, the motecas, dreams of a future.<sup>11</sup> In the same way as in *Los pasos perdidos*, the absent and problematic time is that of the present. If in Carpentier’s novel the journey concealed this absence, “La

noche" is about "a void, an empty space he found impossible to fill.... this nothingness, had taken up an eternity. No, not even time, but rather as if he had passed through something or traveled great distances in this empty space" (176). This is a spatial-temporal void between two equally problematic worlds: a future that the reader confuses with his present (but which the text sets in the future) and the lost past of ancestral, indigenous peoples.

The first world is ambiguously situated in some Latin American country (although "Usté" and "amigazo" seem to give it some affiliation), and while it seems to be a menacing space where accidents, danger, and the possibility of death await him, it is also a safe world on account of its familiarity—it is described as a "protective ceiling"—in contrast with the world of the Aztec, the Latin American indigenous space par excellence, a world of darkness, war, blood, and night. The world of the past seems infinitely more dangerous and inescapable, where violent death becomes an inexorable force; it is "a cursed nightmare" that takes the protagonist "downwards" (toward an inferno of persecution and fear), from which he struggles to leave toward the future, the one of the story itself—the one described at the end of the story as a marvelous dream, as a utopia. Yet, at the same time, this utopia is an "infinite lie," because there too a man with a knife moves toward the protagonist. There is no actual time or space that has any true possibility, but the past is a nightmare without escape, a hostile zone that once again recalls *Los pasos perdidos*.

In the novel the narrator relates the encounter with the primitive tribes in terms of a journey back in time that takes him to "a remote world, whose light and time were unknown to me" (234). The temples of the Conquest are built on top of "the bloody base of the teocalli" (239), the sacrificial stone where the protagonist of "La noche boca arriba" dies. That world is equally hostile for the narrator of *Los pasos perdidos*, who feels like a stranger there: "We are intruders, ignorant outsiders—*metecos* of a short stay—in a city that is born *at the dawn of History*" (240; my emphasis).<sup>12</sup> This world is uninhabitable, a zone of constant danger, a land from which no one returns: exactly the predicament of the protagonist in "La noche boca arriba." Each time the nameless protagonist<sup>13</sup> passes to the "other side," he

encounters a land with the smell of marshlands: “no one returns from the place where marshes and quakes begin”; from there he must flee from war toward the jungle and through the bog. Hence the text repeats the gesture begun in *La vorágine*; the flight toward the land’s interior only brings destruction in the middle of a Nature whose destructive qualities are described time and again (*La vorágine*, *Los pasos perdidos*, *Cien años de soledad*, and *La Casa Verde*).

“Compared to the night from which he had just returned, the warm shadows of the ward appeared delicious to him” (175). These words will define the relationship between the two spaces: “this side” seems tolerable and secure by comparison; the “other”—the “true” side—offers no escape. The “escape plan” from the latter space cannot succeed, and the only hope is to remain on this side. But to the extent that this should become impossible and one cannot get back (as the contact between the two worlds runs this risk), the nightmare is confirmed, and in that sacred time the only present possible is that of death: “Now sleep returned to overtake him,” “Now they were taking him away ... it was the end,” and “now he knew that he was not going to awake.”

## NOTES

11. Cortázar himself humorously suggested that the *motecas* were an indigenous people who rode around on motorcycles. Nonetheless, this does not prevent us from establishing ties with a fragment from *Los pasos perdidos* related to the Cortázar story, which I will cite later on. Interestingly enough, in Carpentier’s text the narrator considers himself a *meteco*, that is, a stranger, an intruder, an “other,” in the world of the past.

12. The *Diccionario de la lengua* defines *mateco* as a foreigner in ancient Greece who established himself in Athens but did not enjoy the rights of citizenship. *Advenedizo*, “outsider”; opposite: “native of, aborigine.” The narrator considers himself a stranger in the utopian land he seeks, and which he also chooses to leave. The same thing happens to the *moteca* in “La noche boca arriba,” because the natives of the land are others, the Aztecs; he is the only one hunted down in a hostile country where death awaits him.

13. The problem of a name and of naming recurs in all the texts of the corpus. We do not know the narrator of *Los pasos perdidos* or of “La noche boca arriba”: “for himself, to go along thinking, he had no name....” In “Axolotl” the same problem is broached by translation: “I found its name in Spanish, *ajolote*...,” but throughout the story the indigenous word is used. Names change or become confused in *La Casa Verde* and *Cien años de soledad*; as in *Los pasos* and

*Cien años de soledad* it is necessary to find names for new things. This is not only a problem of identity but also of representation: Naming implies an intervention in the world, an establishment of a new discourse about how to represent it. This becomes the conflict that these texts discuss and dramatize. S. Fischer's "Geography and Representation" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1995) analyzes the distinct tie between representation and naming.

—Ana María Amar Sánchez. "Between Utopia and Inferno (Julio Cortázar's Version)." *Julio Cortázar: New Readings*, edited by Carlos J. Alonso. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 26–28, 34.

## DORIS T. WIGHT LOOKS AT THREE SHORT STORY MASTERS

[Doris Wight has contributed numerous comparative essays on T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein and has written on the demise of structuralism. In the present essay, Professor Wight examines the fantasies created by three short story masters: Borges, Cortázar, and Robbe-Grillet. Her study focuses on the wound sustained by the unnamed protagonist in Cortázar's "The Night Face Up." The labyrinth, similar to those conjured up by Borges, forces the reader to shift along with the protagonist between two distinct times and spaces. The reader senses and shares the protagonist's need for escape from both.]

The wound in "The Night Face Up" similarly is the cause of all that will follow. Just as Borges' bookworm brings about his ultimate death by rushing upstairs to examine a book, in the Cortázar tale an unnamed young man, unreflectingly at home in the modern mechanized city, is punished for his yielding to the false gods of the technological age. Riding along with stupid serenity on his motorcycle down the Buenos Aires streets, Cortázar's protagonist suffers an accident at an intersection. Suddenly the gleaming, powerful machine upon which he had been riding is lying on top of him, its tremendous tonnage now riding, and lethally crushing, its former rider. Taken to a hospital and operated upon for his injuries, he finds himself, heart

pounding in fear, to be a Moteca Indian being pursued by Aztecs in some age long past but now intolerably present as his menacers close in upon him. It is the time of the war of the blossom, the ritual war in which Aztecs took Motecas and other Indians prisoners for bloody sacrifice. Gratefully the injured motorcyclist wakes up to find himself in the safety of the modern hospital, but again he lapses back into the fearful reality of being pursued through labyrinths of swamps and quaking bogs full of marshy smells, running with his sole chance of escape the narrow labyrinthine trail that only they, the Motecas, knew. Again he wakes in the hospital, but once again he is being pursued, and now with no hope of escape. At the tale's end the impossible life of the past has come to seem all there is. The young man tries valiantly, frantically, to awaken from his nightmare, but the Moteca is not to return to safety and life, for, smelling death irresistibly now, he opens his eyes to see not the hospital room but the executioner-priest approaching him with the fatal stone knife in his hand, and

... he knew now he was not going to wake up, that he was awake, that the marvelous dream had been the other, absurd as all dreams are—a dream in which he was going through the strange avenues of an astonishing city, with green and red lights that burned without fire or smoke, on an enormous metal insect that whirled away between his legs.<sup>3</sup>

Modern life, to this protagonist thrown back completely into history, is finally recognized as “the infinite lie.” He is at last truly himself, a nameless Moteca victim in the war of the blossoms whom the stone-knife executioner has killed and whom the other Aztecs now pick up off the ground where he, like the nameless hospital victim, had been lying face up, on his back; he is hurled to roll down the endless north steps of the great terrace of sacrifice.

#### NOTE

3. “The Night Face Up,” In *End of Game and Other Stories* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963) 76—a translation from the Spanish *Final del juego* by Paul Blackburn.



—Doris T. Wight. “Fantastic Labyrinths in Fictions by Borges, Cortázar, and Robbe-Grillet.” *The Comparatist* 13 (1989): 30–31, 35.

## DAVID WYKES ON TRANSLATING

[The author of *Evelyn Waugh: A Literary Life* (1999), David Wykes, Professor of English at Dartmouth College, has also examined the works of John Oldham, George Orwell, and Ben Jonson. This excerpt focuses on the translation of Cortázar’s “La noche boca arriba” by Paul Blackburn. In particular, Wykes suggests that the footnote added by Blackburn to Cortázar’s epithet acquires authorial weight when reading the story in English and provides essential information on the warrior’s reward for bravery.]

In its English translation by Paul Blackburn, Julio Cortázar’s “La noche boca arriba” (from *Final del juego*, 1956) has a footnote appended to Cortázar’s epigraph for the story. The epigraph either quotes one of the Spanish chroniclers of the Conquest or imitates their style: “And at certain periods they went out to hunt enemies; they called it the war of the blossom” (p. 66).<sup>1</sup> The footnote, ascribed to “Ed.,” first expands on the epigraph: “The war of the blossom was the name the Aztecs gave to a ritual war in which they took prisoners for sacrifice.” Then comes a sentence of commentary. “It is metaphysics to say that the gods see men as flowers, to be so uprooted, trampled, cut down.”

An epigraph, like the title or a footnote, stands in a somewhat problematical relationship to a story. It is of the story without being in it, and this intimate but exterior position is structurally so similar to the author’s relationship to his text that an epigraph will seem to claim a certain authority. It challenges any simple taboo on intentionality. The author put this here, and only the varietal of readers—perhaps the most sophisticated, perhaps the most inhibited—will not assume that by putting it there the author meant to point to something. The epigraph—generally a quotation, the author’s choice but not usually of his own writing—will seem to be there to guide the reader, and its

guidance is most often towards the generalization or abstraction that we call “theme.”

The epigraph to “The Night Face Up” is unusual. It collects and emphasizes at the outset information scattered in the story. It tells us where the Moteca captive is in history and what is going on. It works, in fact, largely like an informative footnote. The only element that might go beyond information towards theme is the name, “the war of the blossom.” The first sentence of the footnote to the English translation operates as a note is expected to do. It can be seen as an aid to the English reader, who might not identify “them” as the Aztecs, and who might not know that the *guerra florida* (variously translated as “flowery war,” “flower war,” “war of the flower(s),” or—by Blackburn—“war of the blossom”) was a ritual war in which the objective was the taking of prisoners for sacrifice. Such supplemental information can be expected from a translator, but the second sentence seems to go beyond a translator’s brief. Its function is interpretive, aggressively thematic, and yet ambiguous, for the opening phrase, “It is metaphysics to say...” may or may not be contemptuous. And credit for all goes to “Ed.”

I suggest that Cortázar supplied the translator with the footnote, perhaps by means of a discussion that Blackburn summarized in the second sentence—a sentence that sounds more appropriate to the genre of the epigraph than to that of the footnote, that sounds in fact more authorial than editorial.

#### NOTE

1. The translation is in *End of the Game and Other Stories* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), pp. 66–76. Parenthetical citations in the text from the English version refer to this edition.

—David Wykes. “Cortázar’s ‘The Night Face Up’ and the War of the Flower.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 25, no. 2 (1988): 147–148.

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**Julio Cortázar**

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